

## Living Shadow 115

### Chapter 115 Death Is Near

The Evil Forest was a place where light dared not tread. The dense canopy of ancient trees blocked out the sky, plunging everything below into an oppressive darkness. For Damon, it wasn't a problem—his shadow-enhanced sight allowed him to navigate easily.

He moved with measured, silent footsteps, his senses on high alert. His objective was clear: map out the area and identify locations where fires could start and spread effectively while staying hidden enough to avoid detection.

More pressing, however, was the need to avoid the creatures that called this forest home. Being on the outskirts of the Evil Forest meant the monsters here were likely weak—rank one, akin to someone of the first class advancement. But even those were more than capable of killing him.

Damon's shadow perception constantly expanded and retracted, scanning the area like a sonar.

The ground beneath his feet was uneven, the soil dark and almost oily. The flora was an unsettling harmony of the forest's sinister aura, with twisted roots and jagged undergrowth. The air itself felt heavy, thick with moisture and carrying a faint, metallic tang of blood.

Damon wrinkled his nose in disgust.

'What the hell is that smell?'

His gaze shifted, and soon he found the source of the sickly stench.

"Corpsebloom flowers."

The large, crimson flowers had wide, fleshy petals that seemed to glisten in the dim light. They exuded a sweet, rotting aroma that was sickeningly alluring. Damon knew their reputation too well: the flowers lured prey close, then released hallucinogenic spores that caused vivid, horrifying visions. Once their victim was incapacitated, the plant's roots would wrap around them, slowly draining their mana until they died.

Damon immediately took several cautious steps back, unwilling to get anywhere near the death trap.

Just as he began to retreat, he felt something slick and cold wrap around his ankle.

He froze, glancing down.

"Venomfang vines..." he whispered, his stomach sinking.

The thick, green-black vines were covered in glistening thorns that oozed toxic secretion. Reacting to vibrations in the air, they moved like serpents. And if they managed to lash out and inject their venom, paralysis was guaranteed.

Damon's dagger was in his hand in an instant. With swift, precise movements, he slashed through the vine around his ankle before the rest could entangle him. He rolled to the ground as more vines whipped toward him, narrowly avoiding their grasp.

But the damage had been done. His body was already going numb, his limbs sluggish and unresponsive.

"Damn it..." he muttered, fumbling through his uniform for the antidote he had prepared in advance.

He yanked out a vial and downed the contents, the bitter liquid burning his throat. Within moments, the sensation began to return to his limbs, and he let out a shaky breath of relief.

"That was way too close..." Damon muttered as he pushed himself to his feet. "This place really is a death trap."

For a moment, he hesitated, the weight of the forest pressing down on him.

'Should I just go back?'

The thought lingered, but he quickly bit his lip, forcing it away. There was no turning back. If he failed to make it into the top ten, he would be expelled, and the humiliation of proving Kael right was something he couldn't stomach.

"Plus... I spent way too much money on all those supplies. I'd rather die than see it go to waste," he muttered, a renewed sense of determination hardening his resolve.

Pushing aside his fear, Damon steadied himself and marched deeper into the forest, every step a testament to his resolve. Whatever dangers lay ahead, he would face them head-on. There was no other choice.

Damon spent a grueling three hours mapping the treacherous terrain of the Evil Forest, encountering all manner of deadly flora. Each step was fraught with danger, and his survival hung by a thread more than once.

At one point, Damon found himself ensnared by Dusk Bloom Fungus, its tendrils leeching away his vitality. He managed to break free, but not before losing precious [HP]. Later, a brush with a Dread Lily left him screaming on the ground for three agonizing minutes as vivid hallucinations tore at his sanity.

The low cries of his torment drew the attention of a nearby monster a Nocturne Stag.

The monstrous creature had jet-black fur that absorbed light, rendering it nearly invisible in the dim forest. Its faintly glowing eyes and jagged antlers gave it an otherworldly menace. Hearing the Stag's approach, Damon fled blindly, stumbling into a stream. He quickly submerged himself, using his shadow perception to confirm there were no threats beneath the surface.

Thanks to his Water Celebration skill, Damon held his breath for the entire hour the Nocturne Stag lingered by the stream, searching for its prey. When it finally departed, Damon surfaced, soaked and trembling, but alive.

The ordeal was far from over. Damon narrowly avoided being consumed by a massive Venomous Flytrap, escaping through its razor-sharp teeth at the last possible moment. Several other brushes with death followed, each testing his luck and resolve.

Despite the constant danger, Damon made significant progress. He identified areas where fire would spread easily, discovering clusters of Oil Vines and hollow trees—ideal ignition points. One hollow tree housed a hive of Killer Bees, and approaching it nearly cost him his life.

He also carefully mapped the terrain, pinpointing monster lairs and even stumbling upon the den of the Wendigo he had narrowly escaped from during his last venture into the forest.

By the end of the night, Damon had achieved his objective. Exhausted and battered, he hid his tools in an empty hollow tree surrounded by Ignis Vines. His body ached all over, covered in black soil to mask his scent. Even after taking healing potions, he remained injured, and his vitality was dangerously low.

"Only 30 HP left," he muttered, wincing as he moved.

Eager to leave, Damon made his way toward the academy barrier, his body screaming for rest. But as he neared the small river that marked the boundary, a low, guttural growl froze him in his tracks.

His shadow perception extended, and dread washed over him as he sensed the unmistakable presence of a monster.

It was the Wendigo.

The creature loomed just at the edge of his half-kilometer perception radius, but Damon knew it could see him with unnatural clarity. The Wendigo's bloodlust pierced through the air, an oppressive weight bearing down on him.

He wished he had spread his perception further.

Without hesitation, Damon bolted. His heart pounded in his chest, his breath ragged as his Remorseless skill activated, sharpening his focus and pushing his body to its limits. He used his [5x to Speed], his movements a blur as he raced for the barrier.

But the Wendigo was faster. Its monstrous speed easily outpaced that of any human, and it closed the distance with terrifying ease.

Damon could feel its presence bearing down on him, the primal fear of death clawing at his mind.

For all intents and purposes, Damon Grey was about to die tonight.