

Living Shadow 121

Chapter 121 Weeding Out The Competition

"The Evil Forest... isn't that a death zone?"

"I heard only seniors go there to train."

"There's no way we'll survive..."

"That place has countless rank-one monsters—and even higher-ranked ones!"

"We... we're all going to die..."

Murmurs of panic and despair spread through the students like wildfire, their faces paling as the implications of Professor Kael's announcement sank in. Even the top students, usually brimming with confidence, wore uneasy expressions.

Professor Kael, standing calm and composed, scanned the crowd. His cold, analytical gaze eventually settled on Damon Grey, who stood apart from the others. Unlike the rest, Damon looked calm, his expression firm, his dark eyes betraying no trace of fear.

'He's unusually confident...'

By Damon's side, Leona clenched her fists, her teeth grinding audibly. They all understood the reputation of the Evil Forest—none of them had yet achieved their first class advancement, and facing a rank-one monster, let alone something stronger, was a death sentence.

Out of habit, Leona turned instinctively toward Damon, searching for reassurance. Seeing his unshaken demeanor, she couldn't help but ask,

"Do you think we stand a chance against a rank-one monster... if we all teamed up?"

She was referring to their friend group of five, but Damon, knowing the real situation, didn't bother sugarcoating his response.

"If we fought a monster at the first class advancement, we'd all die. No doubt about that."

His blunt answer made Evangeline, who stood nearby, pale. "What if we had a—"

"Not even with a good plan," Damon cut her off, his tone dismissive. "But who knows..."

Sylvia, who had been silent, stroked her chin thoughtfully.

"I doubt they'd actually make us fight monsters of the first rank. That wouldn't make sense."

Xander scoffed, his voice dripping with cynicism.

"When has this academy ever made sense?"

Damon said nothing, keeping his gaze on Professor Kael, waiting for the man to reveal the rules.

To everyone's surprise, Kael sighed, his expression softening slightly.

"For those of you who are afraid and don't want to take the evaluation, you can forfeit here. However, doing so will count as a failure. This evaluation accounts for 70% of your total credit score. If you fail it, you can make up for it during the end-of-semester evaluation. But I assure you, that will be much harder than what we have in store today."

A student raised his hand. Damon recognized him as Natch Wuta, ranked sixth among their year.

"Are we going to be fighting in the Evil Forest?" Natch asked nervously.

Kael nodded. "Yes, you will."

Natch's face twisted in apprehension. "What are our odds of victory?"

Kael shook his head. "I can't answer that. But most of you will inevitably fail. Only the best will remain."

A wave of frightened murmurs rippled through the students.

Kael stepped forward, his voice cutting through the chatter.

"Those who wish to forfeit, stay here. The rest, follow me to the exam venue."

With that, he turned and walked away, the other professors trailing behind him.

The students hesitated, fear anchoring their feet to the ground. No one wanted to be the first to move.

Feeling annoyed, Damon stepped forward without a second thought, his calm demeanor unshaken.

Leona bit her lip. "Wait, don't you think we should—"

"What's there to think about?" Damon interrupted, his voice steady.

His unshakable resolve spurred Leona to follow, her fear overridden by the need to keep up. Evangeline and Sylvia, not wanting to be left behind, quickly fell in line. Xander, unwilling to let Damon outshine him, followed as well.

As Damon led the group, other hesitant students began to trickle in behind him.

Spreading his Shadow Perception, Damon caught glimpses of those who stayed behind, paralyzed by fear. He smirked inwardly.

'I see... this was the plan all along. They wanted to weed out the competition before even announcing the rules. A psychological game.'

He withdrew his Shadow Perception, focusing on the path ahead. Despite the fear gripping the group, nearly 90% of the students decided to follow, their resolve hardening.

The academy's methods were truly insidious. They hadn't explicitly stated that the students would face monsters but had heavily implied it, letting fear work its magic.

'Anyone with a shred of self-preservation wouldn't dare face a rank-one monster without a first-class advancement. Even then, victory isn't guaranteed,' Damon thought.

And this was only the beginning. He had no doubt the academy had more surprises in store.

The group made their way to the forest in the crisp morning air. Damon glanced around as they walked, searching for Marcus. It didn't take long to spot the boy, who looked disheveled and paranoid, his eyes darting suspiciously between the others. Marcus muttered to himself under his breath, clutching his arms as though warding off unseen threats.

Damon smirked. During the past week, he had systematically broken Marcus down. He'd made the boy write nonsensical phrases, draw strange symbols in his own blood, and even leave behind a written record confessing to aiding a mysterious god in killing his friends. Damon had ensured his own name was never mentioned in the documents, leaving Marcus as the perfect scapegoat.

'It's almost too easy now,' Damon thought, suppressing a dark chuckle.

A sudden growl from his stomach reminded him of his hunger. He held his head momentarily, shaking off the discomfort as they marched deeper into the forest.

They passed the familiar boundary of the normal region and moved beyond the old barrier line. The terrain shifted noticeably, the air growing heavier with each step. Soon, they reached the river that marked the edge of the Evil Forest. The water glistened under the sunlight, but crossing it would mean stepping into the suffocating dread that permeated the forest's boundary.

Even standing on the edge, Damon could feel the oppressive atmosphere of the Evil Forest—a silent promise of death to anyone who dared venture inside. And this was only the buffer zone, where most monsters had been driven back.

Professor Kael stepped forward, his commanding presence silencing the murmurs among the students.

"Congratulations to those of you who chose to continue. By making it this far, you have each earned 10 points."

Damon's bracelet buzzed, and a glowing "10" appeared on its surface. He glanced at it briefly before returning his attention to Kael, who raised his voice to address the crowd.

"Now, I shall explain the rules."

The students leaned forward, anticipation and fear mingling on their faces.

"The most important rule," Kael said, his tone cold and unyielding, "is that everything and anything goes during the evaluation, except the use of magical artifacts."