

## Living Shadow 124

### Chapter 124 Automata

Xander glared at Damon, who leaned casually against a tree, wearing his usual tired expression.

"What is wrong with you? Why aren't we heading in?"

Damon sighed, his calm demeanor unshaken. "Calm down, airhead. Get your head out of the clouds for a moment."

Evangeline brushed her hair aside, her gaze sharp. "Are you letting them head in first... to scout out the danger?"

Sylvia tilted her head thoughtfully. "That's a feasible idea, but won't they gain more points that way?"

Leona swung her mace over her shoulder, her eagerness evident. "Yeah, I'm ready to go. Let's not waste time."

Damon let out another sigh, raising his hand lazily as if to dismiss their concerns.

"If the points were that easy to find, we wouldn't be forming parties, would we?"

He began a countdown, his voice calm but purposeful.

"Three, two, one... and scream."

As soon as the words left his mouth, an ear-piercing shriek echoed out from the forest, sending chills down their spines. The blood-curdling sound made everyone pale—everyone except Damon, who remained unaffected.

'That's probably someone stumbling into a Dread Lily,' he thought coldly, recalling his own harrowing experiences in the forest.

He stepped forward, his tone even but sharp.

"In the heat of the moment, those idiots forgot that even without monsters, it's still the Evil Forest, not their mother's garden. The flora there is just as deadly, and the safety bracelet doesn't make them invincible."

Turning to face the group, Damon continued,

"We've settled on a strategy. Now, who's going to be the leader? By adventurer rules of engagement, the person who built this party is Sylvia. So, by that measure, I nominate her as leader."

The others exchanged glances, unsure how to respond to Damon's calm proposal.

'That way, you wouldn't be my responsibility... and I won't feel guilty for what happens next,' Damon thought to himself.

Xander nodded after a moment. "Alright, I can accept that, as long as it's someone trustworthy. Unlike you."

Damon sneered, unfazed. "Whatever strokes your ego."

Evangeline nodded as well. "Wise choice. She has a good head on her shoulders and is less prone to reckless decisions."

Leona, however, shook her head. "No. I nominate Damon. He's more cunning and the strongest one here."

Damon bit his lip, silently cursing.

'Damn it, Leona, I don't need your support right now.'

Sylvia hesitated but eventually agreed. "She's right. Damon, you—"

"No," Damon cut her off sharply. "In terms of strength and ranking, I'm the weakest. Sylvia balances us all. No arguments."

Leona crossed her arms defiantly. "I demand you do it."

Xander narrowed his eyes. "Why are we even debating something so pointless right now? If he doesn't want to do it, let's just go already."

Damon sneered at him. "Go ahead and tell me how you really feel."

Evangeline stepped between them, her voice firm.

"That's enough! Sylvia will be the leader. To satisfy Leona, Damon can be vice leader or something. With three votes, Sylvia wins."

Damon sighed, shrugging in defeat.

"I hope you realize vice leader isn't an actual position, but fine. Works for me."

Evangeline turned to Sylvia. "Now that it's decided, what do we do, party leader?"

Sylvia fidgeted awkwardly, clearly uncomfortable being put on the spot. Her eyes darted to Damon for support.

"Ahh... umm... we should head out," she said hesitantly.

Xander nodded but smirked slyly. "Aren't you going to give the party some words of encouragement? Isn't that part of the leader's job—to boost morale?"

Sylvia's face turned red, and she stammered, "Ahh... I..."

Damon rolled his eyes and sneered. "Go ahead and put her on the spot, genius, as if she wasn't already under enough pressure."

Grabbing Sylvia's arm, he gently pulled her forward. "Let's go."

Sylvia raised her head and nodded, the gesture filled with relief as she followed him.

They crossed the river and entered the Evil Forest. The sunlight barely pierced through the dense, dark canopy, casting eerie shadows over the forest floor. Even during the day, the place was unnerving, the scent of decay and death hanging heavy in the air.

Faint screams and the sounds of distant battles echoed from the students who had ventured ahead.

Damon, who had only seen the forest at night before, found it unchanged. The oppressive atmosphere, the lurking danger—it all whispered the same silent challenge.

"Come if you dare."

Xander swallowed hard, his nerves betraying him. As someone born and raised in the Valtheron Empire, he knew well the perils of this cursed forest. Every tale he'd ever heard about it resurfaced in his mind, feeding his anxiety. But a glance at Damon, who walked ahead with an unreadable expression, made him grit his teeth and push the fear aside.

Losing to Damon, in anything, was unthinkable.

Damon stepped into the forest's deep shade, his movements steady and confident.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Let's go. Arm yourselves."

Though Sylvia was technically the leader, Damon carried himself as if he were in charge. His composed demeanor naturally drew attention, even from Sylvia, who hesitated before speaking.

"Um... Damon, why aren't you armed? You're only carrying a quiver," she asked, glancing nervously at him.

Without a word, Damon reached into his jacket and pulled out a compact, metal object. With a sharp snap, it unfolded into a sleek, metallic bow.

"Trust me," he said coolly, "I'm armed."

Sylvia nodded, her confidence in him momentarily boosted.

They moved deeper into the forest, Damon taking the lead. His role was clear—he was the scout. If danger arose, his job was to fall back and provide support from the rear with his arrows.

Xander was the group's tank, standing at the front to absorb damage. Evangeline, a knight with healing abilities, played a dual role as both a combatant and support. Leona, with her immense physical strength and mace, was the group's heavy hitter.

Sylvia, as the leader and primary healer, carried the heavy burden of strategizing and keeping the group in sync during battle. This responsibility weighed on her—it wasn't just their skills or strength on the line, but their very lives, even with the safety bracelets as a backup.

Their formation seemed solid on paper, but reality was about to test it.

From the shadows of the Evil Forest, a hulking, fur-covered figure emerged. It was bipedal, with long claws that gleamed faintly in the dim light. Its appearance resembled an ape, but its glowing, robotic eyes betrayed its artificial nature.

"An automata up ahead," Damon called out, retreating to stand beside Sylvia.

'That's an automata? It looks so real... well, except for those eyes,' he thought, his mind assessing its movements.

Sylvia readied her bow, her hands steady despite the tension.

"Take it down," she commanded, her voice firm.