

Living Shadow 127

Chapter 127 Stacked Against Him

Xander glared at Damon, his fists clenched and trembling with barely contained anger.

"You honorless mongrel... you stole my kill!"

Damon sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose as if dealing with a child.

"I save you, and you insult me... and I'm the mongrel?"

Xander's teeth ground together, his fury barely held in check.

"That's enough you two, we're supposed to be working together," Evangeline interjected, her voice firm yet calm as she stepped between them.

She exhaled softly, her eyes filled with a mix of exhaustion and patience.

Sylvia approached Damon with an impressed smile. Her gaze fell to his reddened fingers as she gently took his hand in hers.

"Amazing... you must be insane. I can't believe you actually did it," she said, awe lacing her voice.

Damon glanced at her, his tone indifferent. "I did. So what?"

Sylvia looked up at him, her expression shifting between astonishment and curiosity.

"So what? You created a new spell—or at least modified an existing one. Your fingers should've been blown off from the recoil. How are they only red?"

Damon shrugged nonchalantly. "Sorry to disappoint you, but my fingers are still intact."

Sylvia shook her head quickly, her voice flustered. "No, I didn't mean it like that..."

Her hands lingered on his as she continued examining his reddened fingers.

"You're amazing... I thought it wasn't doable, but you actually made it work."

Damon watched her with a calm expression before speaking.

"Are you going to heal me, or are you planning to keep holding my hands forever?"

Sylvia's cheeks flushed slightly as she cleared her throat. "Ahem, sorry..."

A soft stream of white lunar magic flowed from her palms into Damon's fingers. The throbbing pain he'd been enduring began to ease, slowly fading into nothingness.

When she was done, Damon pulled his hands back, her curious gaze still fixed on him.

"How did you make it work?" she asked eagerly.

Damon exhaled, glancing at the group. "We still have an evaluation to finish."

Sylvia nodded, though her shoulders slumped slightly in disappointment.

"There's no need to look so glum," Damon added, glancing back at her.

"It's simple. I calibrated my mana and judged the distance between the attack and my fingers. The magic bullet spell is just a knockoff of the basic magic blast spell."

Sylvia shook her head, smiling.

"It's not simple. It's a massive improvement. Most people gave up on the idea because of the dangers and recoil, but you've revolutionized the most basic spell into something far more powerful."

Leona chuckled, shaking her head. "That's Damon for you... always getting rewarded for reckless behavior."

Damon shot her a pointed look. "I shouldn't be hearing that from you, of all people."

Leona scratched her cheek awkwardly, a sheepish smile crossing her face.

Evangeline chimed in, her smile warm. "You always manage to do the unthinkable. That swinging around you did earlier in the trees—was that what you've been training in the woods this whole time?"

Damon gave her a small nod.

Xander sneered. "So you created a spell. Big deal. It's not even first-class or higher. What's the big fuss about?"

Damon smirked, his tone dry. "No need to be jealous, lover boy."

Xander bristled. "You want to say that to my face?"

Damon met his glare with a bored expression. "I just did."

Evangeline sighed, clearly exasperated. "Let's just go."

With that, the group moved deeper into the forest. Damon led the way, his knowledge of the terrain sparing them from the traps of the insidious flora.

'This is the result of a week of suffering...' Damon thought, keeping the truth to himself. He preferred to maintain his mysterious image.

Of course, part of his motive was to impress Evangeline. But his primary reason? To get under Xander's skin. Watching Xander fume was its own reward, and Damon took every opportunity to make him look as incompetent as possible by showcasing his superior hunting and tracking skills.

Naturally, his efforts didn't go unnoticed. He earned the admiration of Sylvia and Leona as well, much to Xander's chagrin.

The group's progress was slow and frustrating. Even after the sun climbed high into the sky, the number of points they could find remained painfully insufficient.

"We need to find a place to rest before we burn ourselves out," Evangeline said, her voice steady but laced with concern.

Damon nodded in agreement. With the number of automata they had slain, they should have been well on their way to reaching the required 3000 points. Yet, they were nowhere close.

His unease grew with every passing moment.

'This doesn't make sense. If we're struggling, the others must be doing worse. And yet... why does it feel like this entire evaluation is stacked against me?'

Damon's suspicion wasn't baseless. Unlike the other students, failure for him didn't just mean losing points or privileges—it meant expulsion. He couldn't shake the nagging thought that Kael, the creator of the evaluation, had designed this entire ordeal to ensure his failure.

'Don't tell me Kael set this up just to get rid of me...'

He clenched his fists, his thoughts racing back to the documents he'd seen in the student council office. Kael's name had been all over them.

As they ventured further, Damon led the group to a familiar cave. He crouched down near the entrance, running his fingers through the blackened soil. Bringing his hand to his nose, he sniffed it like a seasoned tracker.

"This scent... Wendigo," he murmured, his voice calm but firm.

Sylvia's eyes widened. "Wendigo? They wouldn't leave one behind unless... they actually want us to die.... There shouldn't be any here."

Damon nodded, his expression unreadable.

'I already knew that, he thought, keeping his observations to himself.

Xander sneered. "You have no proof."

Leona stepped closer, sniffing the air. "There's definitely a monster scent here. I think he's right."

Xander clicked his tongue in irritation. "Lucky guess."

Damon rose to his full height, maintaining his calm demeanor. He pointed at the deep claw marks near the entrance of the cave.

"Judging by the depth and pattern of these marks, I'd say it's a female. First rank. Probably has young."

Evangeline looked at him with growing admiration.

"You got all that from just looking at the claw marks?"

Damon glanced at Xander with a smirk. "It's a simple skill. Anyone can do it."

Xander's glare darkened, but he said nothing.

The group cautiously approached the cave, greeted by the sickening stench of dried and decaying blood. Sylvia stepped inside first, her gaze scanning the interior.

"There aren't any point crystals here... or automata," she said, her voice tinged with unease. Her eyes fell on a dark pool of blood.

"What happened here? It looks like..."

Leona sniffed the air again, her expression softening with sadness.

"Wendigo blood. Pretty young, too..." She lowered her gaze.

Sylvia glanced at the dried pools of blood.

"I can't believe the professors would kill the wendigo's infants. That's just cruel."

Damon kept his expression neutral, hiding the truth.

'Actually, I did. But I'll let them take the blame for this one.'

"Indeed," he said, his voice laced with mock indignation.

"Who would do something so inhumane and unethical?"

Xander scoffed, his glare sharp. "You would. I wouldn't put it past you."

Evangeline turned to Xander, her eyes stern.

"I know you don't like each other, but accusing him without evidence is unnecessary."

Xander's eyes widened in disbelief. "Did you all forget his philosophy? And besides, these are monsters, not people."

Sylvia shook her head firmly. "That's beside the point. This is different."

Xander's glare shifted back to Damon, who met it with a mocking smirk.

"Let's go," Damon said casually, his tone laced with subtle mockery.

"I can't stand this atrocious sight. We can take a break outside and come up with a strategy."

The group exited the cave, stepping into the fresh air. However, their respite was short-lived. A party of students stumbled toward them, their bodies battered and bloodied. The faint smell of fresh blood mixed with the lingering stench of the wendigo's den.

"Hey... help us..." called the leader of the group, his voice weak.

Damon's eyes narrowed as he recognized the speaker. Natch Wuta, ranked sixth among the students.