

Living Shadow 129

Chapter 129 Great Automata

Damon coughed, wincing as Sylvia's healing magic worked to stabilize his injuries. His HP had risen to [40/50], but the damage sustained during their attempt to defeat the guardian of the gold crystal still lingered. It had been a futile effort. Damon had warned them it was a bad idea, but Xander, emboldened by misplaced confidence, had charged ahead. Even with Natch's party joining forces, the outcome was a devastating failure.

One member of Natch's team didn't make it back. Damon had learned something chilling during the skirmish: those who fell to the automata had their accumulated points absorbed, making the guardian even stronger.

Now, evening shadows stretched across the forest, the sun casting a fiery glow over the scene. Damon glanced around the encampment at the base of the hill. They weren't the only ones who had failed. Multiple groups had tried to conquer what they were now calling the Great Automata, only to return battered and broken. One team, led by the formidable Rank Five—a black-haired fae—had lost half their members in the process.

Time was slipping away. Midnight loomed closer, and with it, the looming threat of failure for everyone involved. No one had come close to the 3000 points required to pass.

Damon's shadow twitched sporadically, a sign of the barely-contained hunger that threatened to overwhelm him. It was the only thing keeping him standing, but he knew the price he'd pay if he let it consume him fully.

The other students seemed unaware of the impending chaos. They clung to the naive hope that the top of the hill held enough points for them all. Damon knew better. Even if they managed to defeat the automata, the real nightmare would begin when everyone turned on each other to claim the spoils.

'Betrayal never comes from your enemies,' Damon thought grimly.

Sylvia, standing nearby, scanned the various parties with a furrowed brow.

"Your plan worked for the most part. All the teams are here," she said softly.

Damon nodded, his gaze fixed on the hill. He'd convinced Sylvia and Evangeline to gather the remaining parties, knowing no single group could defeat the Great Automata on their own. Of course, they wouldn't have listened to him—a probationary student at the bottom of the rankings. So, he had enlisted the help of the top two students to rally everyone.

In the time it had taken to gather the teams, Damon had quietly set up traps around the area, ensuring they had some form of advantage. Now, everything was in place. Sylvia's voice pulled him from his thoughts.

"What is it now?" he asked, noticing her troubled expression.

She hesitated before replying, "It's just... the exam feels strange. Like we're being set up to fail."

Damon's expression remained impassive. Sylvia lacked the experience to fully understand the sinister nature of their situation, but she was perceptive.

"I have no intention of failing," he said simply, keeping his true thoughts to himself.

Sylvia seemed to take his words as reassurance and nodded, though her worry lingered. She suddenly grabbed his arm.

"I can't lead this many people," she admitted. "I don't think I have it in me, not with so many expectant faces. Can you do it?"

Damon shook his head. "They don't respect me," he replied bluntly.

Her shoulders slumped. "Oh... I see."

He glanced at her and added, "Don't worry. I won't make you do it either. I already have someone in mind."

Sylvia blinked, curious. "Who?"

He pointed at Evangeline, who stood a short distance away.

"She's perfect. She's ranked number one, has the qualifications, and won't face opposition. Everyone will rally behind her."

Waving Evangeline over, Damon instructed her to gather the leaders of the other parties. She complied, though her expression betrayed her confusion about why she was suddenly thrust into the role.

Twelve leaders assembled, their teams significantly smaller after the trials of the forest and the automata. Sylvia stepped forward, addressing the anxious group.

"As you all know, there are no points left to be found in the forest. The only ones remaining are on that hill, guarded by the Great Automata. We've called you here because we have a plan to take it down," she said, her voice steady despite the pressure.

The leaders exchanged solemn nods, acknowledging the grim reality. Sylvia turned to Evangeline, signaling for her to take charge.

"We propose a coordinated siege on the hill," Sylvia continued. "If we work together, we can defeat the automata and ensure everyone has a chance to pass. I nominate Evangeline to lead this expedition."

The gathered leaders murmured amongst themselves but didn't voice any objections. Damon watched quietly, his mind already running through the strategy he had devised. They had one shot at this, and failure wasn't an option.

Back at the starting point, Professor Chrome sighed, his gaze settling on the growing group of students who had been eliminated from the evaluation. Their expressions ranged from disappointment to outright despair, a testament to the brutal nature of the exam.

"Professor Blackthorne," Chrome began, addressing his colleague, "are you sure you aren't being too hard on them? With this setup, the likelihood of everyone failing is uncomfortably high. Even if they pass, I'd estimate no more than five students making it through."

Professor Alfred shook his head, the faintest hint of amusement in his expression. "That's an optimistic guess, Chrome. I'd wager three at most."

Kael, the third professor observing the proceedings, let out a long sigh as his eyes scanned the disheartened students. His attention lingered on one particular individual still in the field.

'It seems he hasn't dropped out yet,' Kael thought. 'That boy is more stubborn than I gave him credit for.'

Professor Alfred, noticing Kael's contemplative look, broke the silence. "And you, Kael? Which candidate do you think has the best shot at passing?"

Chrome smiled faintly, leaning back in his chair. "It's hard to say. I like to believe in every student's potential, no matter how bleak things look."

He glanced at Kael, raising an eyebrow. "What about you?"

Kael frowned, his tone sharp as he replied, "I'll tell you who isn't going to pass. After this exam, he'll be leaving the academy for good."

Chrome sighed heavily. "Damon Grey, huh? That one's a persistent little troublemaker.....I quite like him."

Professor Alfred chuckled, clearly enjoying the exchange.

"You've got a soft spot for that kid, don't you, Kael?"

Kael clicked his tongue in irritation, but his narrowed eyes betrayed the truth.

"Don't read too much into it. The boy just doesn't know when to give up."

The conversation trailed off as they turned their attention back to the screens, watching the chaos unfold in real time. Somewhere in the field, Damon Grey continued to fight tooth and nail against odds that even the professors deemed insurmountable.