

Living Shadow 130

Chapter 130 Starved Shadow

Damon rolled across the damp ground, shadows flickering around him as he conjured a protective barrier. He glanced up the hill, where a cluster of knight automata unleashed a relentless barrage of magic. Below, a group of students stood firm, their multi-colored barrier shimmering as it absorbed the onslaught.

"Barrier group, pull back!" Damon's voice cut through the chaos. "Left flank, fire now!"

The designated group immediately responded, launching torrents of water and ice magic uphill. Though the attack barely scratched the automata, it served its purpose. The forest floor was now slick with water and melting ice, creating a treacherous surface.

The automata, humanoid in design, appeared almost lifelike. Towering over two meters tall, their metallic forms were etched with glowing runes, and their blue visors pulsed with light. Each carried weapons imbued with elemental attributes. These advanced versions were leagues above their predecessors, with near-impenetrable magic resistance. Damon couldn't shake the thought that the earlier versions had merely been scouts, gathering combat data for these monstrosities.

"Evangeline, give the signal!" Damon called, urgency lacing his voice.

Evangeline nodded, raising her sword high. A flash of radiant light illuminated the forest, signaling the next phase of their plan.

Halfway up the hill, Xander, Natch, and Sylvia sprang into action. Hidden among the foliage, they pulled thick vines taut. The charging automata stumbled, their heavy forms toppling like dominos as they slid down the slick hill. The crashing of metal against metal echoed through the forest.

"Third flank, now!" Damon barked.

Leona and a group of students stepped forward, pressing their hands into the muddy ground. Streams of electricity surged through the wet terrain, striking the automata. The smell of ozone filled the air as sparks flew, and the automata convulsed under the electric assault.

Evangeline stepped forward, her voice commanding. "Fire!"

From all directions, an array of magical blasts—fire, wind, ice, and earth—converged on the automata. Even with their magic resistance, the sustained assault began to take its toll, leaving the mechanical knights battered and smoking.

Damon nodded in approval.

"Subjugation party, head for the great automata. Everyone else, finish off the lesser ones."

As the students surged forward to dismantle the weakened automata, Damon led his group uphill. Their objective was clear: defeat the great automata and claim the gold crystal.

This strategy had been hours in the making. Damon and Sylvia had devised it together, knowing full well that the other students wouldn't listen to him directly.

Evangeline, with her rank and noble status, had been the perfect leader. No one dared question her authority. When dissent arose during the planning phase, Evangeline silenced it in her own way—by brutally defeating the loudest opponent. Her display of dominance had reminded everyone why she was number one, and Damon hadn't needed to say a word.

'Good thing I wasn't stupid enough to spar with her,' Damon thought, recalling her ruthlessness. 'Not without my Shadow's Hunger backing me.'

Now, everything was set for the final phase. Three parties were tasked with taking on the great automata: Natch's reinforced group, Damon's original team, and the party led by Faram, the black-haired fae ranked fifth in the academy. The stakes were high. Whoever landed the killing blow on the great automata would claim its points, and whoever secured the crystal would reap its untold rewards.

But Damon knew the real danger lay in the aftermath. Once the great automata fell and the realization set in that no more points remained, alliances would crumble. Betrayal wasn't just a possibility—it was inevitable.

As they approached the summit, Damon's gaze lingered on the great automata. It stood like an imposing sentinel, its metallic frame brimming with energy. This was no ordinary opponent. Unlike the wendigo of the Evil Forest, this foe had been crafted with precision, designed to adapt to their combat styles.

'I wonder if they're testing this automata for the demon wars,' Damon mused. It was a plausible theory.

If these machines proved cost-effective, they could revolutionize warfare. But if not, they would be scrapped, another ambitious project lost to the annals of failed experiments.

Pushing the thought aside, Damon tightened his grip on his weapon. The time for speculation was over. The battle for survival—and the crystal—had begun.

They reached the top of the hill just as the sun sank below the horizon, its dying light giving way to the oppressive darkness of the forest. Damon wasn't bothered; the shadows welcomed him as one of their own. However, the others wouldn't fare as well in the pitch-black environment.

Evangeline waved her hand, summoning floating orbs of light that hovered in the air around them. The orbs bathed the area in a warm glow, banishing the deep shadows left by the sunset. The group let out a collective sigh of relief as visibility returned, though Damon noted the drawback—it had also announced their arrival to the enemy.

The great automata's hulking form stirred in the distance, its heavy metallic body emitting a rhythmic clanging as it moved across the forest floor. The area around it was devoid of the dangerous flora characteristic of the Evil Forest, save for a few scattered trees. Behind the automata, the gold crystal shimmered faintly, encased in a thin protective barrier.

Damon knew the barrier wouldn't fall until the automata was defeated.

The great automata loomed over them, a towering figure clad in metallic armor that gleamed faintly in the artificial light. Standing over three meters tall, it wielded a massive sword in one hand and a shield in the other. Its silver visor revealed glowing red eyes, devoid of malice yet brimming with an aura of relentless menace. Its frame was etched with barely visible runes, designed to neutralize magic and amplify its resistance.

As they stared it down, the automata raised its sword in a deliberate motion, pointing it directly at them. Damon felt the atmosphere shift. Before his eyes, the world seemed to bleed of its colors, turning into a monochromatic world of black and white. Shadows stirred unnaturally in the faint light, moving as though alive.

A familiar chime echoed in his mind.

[Ding]

[Shadow Hunger: 80%]

Damon's body tensed as the presence within him stirred. His shadow was starved.