

Living Shadow 68

Chapter 68 Dire Opposition

A young man walked through the academy halls, a tired expression etched on his pale face. He wore a black blindfold over his eyes, matching the dark shade of his hair. His academy uniform—a black jacket over a white shirt with black pants—was pristine despite the intense physical training earlier. On his chest, a small brooch read Probation, a label that seemed to mock his current status. Perched on his shoulder was a raven, its sharp eyes scanning their surroundings.

Damon was drained after a long day of rigorous physical and magical exercises. Compared to his classmates, he lagged significantly behind. His refusal to use the system's [5x] skill left him at a natural disadvantage, and his shadow was full, denying him the extra stats boost from [Shadow Hunger].

'The academy uniform is truly impressive,' he mused, brushing off a speck of dust from his jacket.

Even after hours of strenuous training, the uniform remained intact and immaculate. It was a marvel of magitech, capable of withstanding damage, self-mending, and even cleaning itself.

'I think I can understand why they're so expensive,' he thought, though it did little to improve his mood.

It had been a grueling day. The instructors had pushed them through relentless training, and Damon, already at a disadvantage, felt the strain more than anyone else. Still, he had tried to conserve as much energy as possible for his upcoming duel with Xander Ravenscroft. Not that it made a difference—he would have come in last regardless, except perhaps in speed.

And all that speed? It was only good for running away.

Today had been unusual for Damon. He had spent nearly the entire day with the top students in his class. What amused him was that it wasn't his choice—they had been following him. Even now, they were still with him.

Leona, as always, seemed ecstatic.

"It's almost time for the duel. No wonder you came last at everything today. You must be saving your stamina! I'm sure you didn't even try at all."

Damon sneered inwardly.

'Actually, I did try... I just suck.'

He kept his expression neutral, knowing Leona would never believe him if he said it aloud. He couldn't exactly explain that his strength was conditional, dependent on how hungry his shadow was. When it was starving, he could rival the top students, his power exploding. But when it wasn't, he was simply the weakest in the class.

Evangeline nodded in agreement.

"The duel isn't a fight, so you must have kept most of your stamina."

Sylvia chuckled.

"Although, you sure know how to act. I was convinced you were actually tired with how much you were gasping for breath."

Damon stayed silent, his thoughts simmering.

'I was tired. Asking us to run that much should be illegal, especially since the rest of you used magic to enhance your strength.'

Xander scoffed. "Whether he's pretending or not will be determined by the outcome of our duel."

Marcus sneered, his disdain palpable.

"He's just going to humiliate himself. He's trash, and I don't get why you all think he has anything going for him."

Leona's glare could have cut through steel.

"Insult my bestie again, and I'll cripple you."

Marcus flinched, the venom in her voice unmistakable. Leona's disdain for him stemmed from one simple fact: he was weaker than her. She tolerated Xander's sharp tongue because he had the strength to back it up, but Marcus? He was just an irritant.

Xander sighed.

"That's enough. No need to go after Marcus for having an opinion."

Leona's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"He can keep his opinions to himself. If he speaks again, I'll break his legs."

Marcus paled, his face almost as blue as his hair. He knew Leona wasn't one for empty threats. If she said she would break his legs, she would.

Damon remained silent, not even sparing a glance at the group. He could see them clearly within the range of his shadow perception, but his focus was elsewhere—on the duel.

'Five hundred thousand zeni,' he thought, his determination steeling. That was the prize for winning. And Damon had no intention of losing.

They soon reached their destination—a large vaulted door that loomed ahead like the entrance to some ancient fortress.

As the door creaked open, a vast domed room was revealed. It was one of the academy's renowned training facilities, equipped with all manner of magical technology for honing students' combat skills. This particular space was the designated venue for Anti Magic Combat.

Standing at the center of the room was none other than Professor Kael Blackthorn, his presence radiating a dark and oppressive aura.

As they crossed the threshold, Damon's shadow perception immediately caught Kael's distinct energy. It was vastly different from Professor Chrome's. Where Chrome's aura was warm and gentle, Kael's was dark, heavy, and suffocating.

'Right, his attribute is dark magic,' Damon mused, his lips twitching in irritation.

Kael Blackthorn's eyes met Damon's with thinly veiled disdain, a sentiment Damon returned in kind.

"I haven't seen you in class for two days," Kael began, his voice dripping with mockery.

"I assumed you finally took my advice and dropped out."

Damon sneered, the corner of his lips curling upward.

"And give you the satisfaction? I'd never stoop so low. If you want me gone, Kael, you'll have to kick me out yourself."

Evangeline and the others trailing behind Damon were taken aback by his boldness. Speaking so disrespectfully to a professor—especially one as intimidating as Kael Blackthorn—was unthinkable. Yet Damon showed no hesitation, as though the man standing before him didn't hold his academic future in his hands.

Kael shook his head, his cold gaze shifting to Evangeline, Sylvia, and Xander.

"Do you think sucking up to the top students can save you?" he sneered. "If you do, you're wasting your time."

Damon scoffed audibly. "Do I look like the type to suck up to anyone?"

Kael's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"What wouldn't you do? Your very existence is a disgrace to this academy."

Damon bit his lip, a flash of irritation crossing his face. He took a step forward, his voice sharp and unwavering.

"Were you dropped on your head as a baby, or did your mother just not bother to teach you basic manners? If you're deaf, let me repeat myself—I'm not going anywhere."

The room froze. Everyone stared at Damon in disbelief. Leona's golden eyes widened with admiration, her lips parting slightly in awe. Xander looked at Damon as though he had lost his mind, while Evangeline was too stunned to speak. Sylvia, however, appeared visibly anxious, her hands fidgeting nervously at her sides.

Kael's expression darkened, his aura growing heavier as his anger simmered beneath the surface.

"You dare insult me?" he hissed, his voice low and threatening.

Before the tension could escalate further, Sylvia stepped forward hastily, her voice awkward but placating.

"Ah, Professor, please forgive him. It's just... Damon's a bit worked up today. He's mentally preparing for his duel with Xander, so he's a little aggressive..."

Kael's gaze shifted from Sylvia back to Damon, his cold eyes scrutinizing him.

"He intends to duel while wearing that blindfold?" Kael asked with a scoff.

Damon chuckled softly, his voice tinged with mockery.

"I'm just giving the so-called prodigies you think so highly of a handicap," he replied smoothly.

Kael's lips thinned into a line, his narrowed eyes boring into Damon.

"Really now?" he said slowly. "In that case, I'll allow it. I'll even act as the referee for this duel."

He turned his gaze toward Xander, his tone suddenly colder.

"If you destroy him, you automatically pass this class."