

Living Shadow 70

Chapter 70 Playing Unfairly By The Rules

"Did he just pick light?"

"He's insane! No one's ever lasted long against light as a first-year."

"Does he even want to stay in the academy? This is suicide!"

"He's going to fail spectacularly."

The murmurs of Damon's classmates filled the air, dripping with mockery and disbelief. He ignored them, focusing instead on the dial in front of him. The quiet hum of the mechanism confirmed his choice: light.

Professor Kael Blackthorn stepped forward, his cold, grim expression cutting through the room's chatter like a blade.

"Light, is it? Truly, your overconfidence knows no bounds. Or perhaps this is your way of ensuring your failure is as spectacular as possible."

His words drew laughter from the class, the kind that sought to humiliate rather than amuse. Damon clenched the twin glass-like daggers in his hands, their reflective surfaces catching the room's brightness.

'That wasn't even funny,' Damon thought, shaking his head.

'Strength is forged in solitude, not in the approval of others.'

Xander Ravenscroft, his opponent, chuckled darkly. The sword in Xander's hand glinted menacingly under the lights.

"I certainly hope you don't die... from those beams of light. Light magic is the fastest type of magic. You will fail."

Damon scoffed, a smirk tugging at his lips. "Someone sounds scared..."

Xander's eyes narrowed, his voice laced with venom.

"I'm only scared you'll be too dead to apologize after I win."

Damon knew death was a very real possibility. Aether Academy wasn't a place for the weak-hearted. Training here, both inside and beyond its walls, often came with casualties. It was an unspoken reality every student had to accept.

"Pain and failure are the price of power," Damon said, his tone calm and resolute.

Xander let out a low, derisive chuckle.

"Then you will feel them both."

Descending the flight of stairs into the arena, Xander's movements were measured and confident. Damon followed, his steps steady despite the weight of countless eyes bearing down on him.

The arena was vast and well-lit, its walls lined with magic artillery designed to test the limits of any who dared enter. Damon scanned the room through his shadow perception, feeling the spaces where the beams would fire. Above, a transparent glass panel revealed his classmates peering down at him, their faces alight with anticipation.

Damon took a deep breath, his grip tightening on the daggers. Their surface, almost too fragile in appearance, seemed inadequate for the challenge ahead. He furrowed his brow beneath the black blindfold, trying to quiet his doubts.

'This dagger doesn't seem durable,' he admitted to himself. 'But it'll have to do.'

He adjusted his stance, the daggers catching the light as he steadied his breathing.

"What works matters more than what's expected," he muttered under his breath.

The hum of magic filled the air, signaling the start of the trial. The room seemed to hold its breath, waiting for the first strike.

Damon could feel Xander's presence not far from him through his shadow perception, a faint yet unmistakable pulse in the monochrome world his skill revealed.

'I'm about to go up against one of the strongest students in my year... If I win, I get money. Lots of it.'

Damon bit his lip, his heart pounding as if trying to escape his chest. The weight of dozens of stares pressed down on him like a suffocating shroud. He clenched his fists. No one cared about him—not his classmates, not the academy, not even the professor overseeing this trial. He was utterly alone.

A faint static sound crackled from the corners of the room, pulling Damon's attention. Professor Kael's voice followed, cold and detached, echoing through the space.

"Now then... you both know the rules. This is not a game. There is a very real possibility of death in the magic artillery room. While it is used for training, it was originally designed as a weapon. Absolutely do not use your magic attribute to attack each other, nor your fists."

The professor paused, allowing his words to sink in.

"If you feel you are in danger, voice your surrender, and the magic circle hidden beneath your feet will teleport you out. Now then, you may begin."

Damon's heart pounded in his chest, the sound loud in his ears. He took a deep breath, but the fear didn't dissipate. His shadow perception alerted him as small partitions in the walls opened, and magic began gathering within them. The spatial awareness granted by his skill allowed him to sense every beam preparing to fire, but that didn't banish the fear in his mind. If he wasn't careful, one wrong move could be his last.

As that thought crossed his mind, something shifted. His fear and doubt ebbed away, replaced by a calm, calculating clarity. His [Remorseless] skill had activated.

'Right. One of its activation conditions is for me to be in battle. I suppose this counts.'

Damon's expression turned cold, his focus sharpening.

'If I don't fight for myself, no one will.'

The first beam of light shot toward him, aimed directly at his forehead. Damon felt it through his shadow perception, the way the beam distorted the shadows around it. He tilted his head slightly to the side, letting the beam pass harmlessly by and strike the ground behind him.

He tightened his grip on his daggers.

'As I thought. Shadow perception allows me to predict the trajectory of light. Even if it's fast, I can see it beforehand.'

Two more beams fired in quick succession. Damon sidestepped both effortlessly, his movements fluid and precise. He could sense the surprised reactions of his classmates above, watching through the transparent glass.

'The world doesn't define me—I define myself.'

The beams increased in number, now firing ten at once. Damon twisted his body, ducked, and sidestepped, avoiding every one of them. His movements were a seamless dance of precision and grace.

He narrowed his eyes as more partitions opened on the walls.

'Hmmm, this isn't going to be as easy as I thought.'

The beams surged to twenty, all aimed at him with deadly precision. Damon broke into a run, his feet carrying him swiftly around the room. The beams struck the ground behind him, each one narrowly missing its mark.

Despite dodging everything so far, Damon knew this wasn't sustainable. The objective wasn't just to survive—it was to outlast Xander. He shifted some of his focus toward his opponent. Xander had conjured two shields of gravity magic, which hovered around him like protective orbs, deflecting the beams effortlessly as he moved across the room.

Damon sneered at the sight.

'Well, that's not fair. I can't use that type of magic. Does his gravity attribute give him an advantage against light, or is he just that good?'

His mind, now cold and analytical under the influence of [Remorseless], broke the situation down.

'I need to find a way to deal with him before I tire out. This is only the first wave, so I'll hold off on using my [5x] skill and attribute points for now.'

A beam of light streaked toward Damon from his right. He tilted his head just in time to avoid it, then sidestepped another. In one fluid motion, he stepped onto the wall and propelled himself behind Xander, positioning himself just outside the radius of the gravity shields.

A smirk tugged at Damon's lips.

"That's a nice barrier you've got there. Mind sharing the wealth with a lowly commoner?"

Xander turned, his cold gaze locking onto Damon.

"You dare..."

Damon chuckled, his voice laced with mockery.

"Not breaking any rules here. Why are you getting angry?"