

Living Shadow 85

Chapter 85 Apprentice

Damon smirked at her sharp words, crossing his arms casually.

'What a firecracker,' he thought, taking in her defiant stance.

The girl stood in front of him, her short pink hair plastered to her skin with sweat. She wore brown pants and a white shirt, both worn and frayed, evidence of her frequent training. Her piercing blue eyes glared at him with suspicion and fiery determination.

He sighed, tilting his head slightly. "Something tells me you're not going to listen to me."

She narrowed her eyes further, the flames in her hands flickering ominously.

"Oh yeah? What gave you that impression?"

He pointed at the fireballs she held.

"Well, for starters, you're holding a literal ball of flames while looking like you're ready to incinerate me."

She didn't lower her guard, her expression hardening.

"Says the shady guy sneaking into my yard, dressed like some hooded creep. I should scream 'pervert' or 'rapist' and have you dragged away."

Damon winced inwardly at the threat, knowing how troublesome that would be for him.

"And yet, you haven't," he said, his voice calm but pointed.

She glared at him, her hands tightening. "I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt. Barely."

Damon chuckled softly, the sound echoing in the quiet night.

"Go ahead, then. Scream all you like. Your voice won't travel far enough for anyone to hear you."

Her face paled slightly, and her gaze flickered to her surroundings as if realizing the truth in his words.

Seeing her hesitation, Damon softened his tone.

"But there's no need for that. I'm not here to hurt you."

He reached up and pulled down his hood, revealing his pale face. Her blue eyes widened when she saw the black blindfold covering his eyes. His dark hair framed his face, giving him a slightly melancholic appearance, though he still wore a faint, almost playful smile.

"You're... are you blind?" she asked hesitantly.

Damon nodded. "At the moment, yes. But I can see the world just fine in my own way."

She stared at him, clearly confused but sensing no immediate threat.

"Why are you here? Are you... are you a friend of my father's?"

Damon's heart sank at her words, his chest tightening as the weight of his past actions bore down on him. He hesitated, then answered carefully.

"Perhaps. Let's just say I owe him my life."

Her eyes lowered, her expression darkening.

"He's dead. Whatever debts you had are repaid. You can leave now."

He shook his head slowly.

"Don't you want to get into the Academy?"

Her head snapped up at his question, her interest piqued despite her guarded demeanor.

"I do... but what's that got to do with you?"

Damon took a deliberate step closer, his tone steady.

"I can help you get in."

She raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms skeptically.

"Oh really? And how exactly do you plan to do that? Don't tell me you've got a golden ticket or something."

He chuckled softly, shaking his head.

"No golden ticket. But I can help you train to pass the entrance exam."

She eyed him warily as he bit his lip, hesitant but resolute.

"Become my apprentice."

For a moment, Iris simply stared at him, then burst out laughing, her voice filled with disbelief.

"Pfft! Hahaha! Are you for real right now? You want me to be your apprentice?"

Her laughter faded as she glared at him, her tone turning sharp again.

"Are you insane? You're barely older than me, and you don't even look strong! Honestly, you look like a stiff breeze could knock you over. You'd probably fail the Academy entrance exam yourself, let alone train someone else!"

Damon stayed calm, watching her reaction closely through his shadow perception. Despite her words, he could sense her curiosity and the faintest hint of intrigue beneath her fiery exterior.

'She's testing me,' he thought, a smirk forming on his lips. 'Time to show her I'm not as weak as I look.'

'I am loath to admit she's right... I didn't survive the entrance exam. Hell, I came in through a backdoor I didn't even deserve. But I'm not the same guy anymore. I don't have many talents, but I know a lot about the Academy. For the things I don't know, I can get help. I can share resources with her... so, this is something I have to do.'

Damon sighed, keeping his expression calm.

"Don't be ridiculous... I'm actually very strong."

'Time to bluff my way through this.'

Iris raised an eyebrow, skepticism written all over her face.

"You? Strong? You don't look it."

Damon pulled his cloak back slightly, revealing the intricate design of his Academy uniform beneath. The black and gold embroidery shimmered faintly in the dim light, and the insignia of the Academy gleamed on his chest.

Of course he had removed his brooch of shame before hand.

Her eyes lingered on it, curiosity flickering beneath her guarded expression.

Damon smirked inwardly.

'Finally got your attention, huh?'

Iris took a step closer, her gaze fixed on the uniform. She bit her lip, her eyes narrowing.

"So what? There are plenty of students at the Academy. How strong are you, really?"

Damon had been waiting for that question. He crossed his arms and tilted his head slightly, his tone laced with feigned indifference.

"Oh, me? Not very strong... I only defeated the strongest students in my year. No big deal. I even went up against Lilith Astranova."

Her eyes widened, her breath catching slightly.

"No way. You fought the student council president?"

Damon didn't respond immediately, letting the weight of his words sink in.

'I went up against her... I never said I fought her.'

He kept his expression neutral, content to let her misinterpret his vague statement.

"She's very interested in me after she lost, in fact. I'm one of the few people in the Academy who has permission to call her by name."

Iris's shock deepened. Of course, that wasn't entirely a lie. Lilith had told him to call her by her name, and she was interested in him—though her interest stemmed from a desire to hunt him down, not admiration. But there was no need for Iris to know that.

Iris tilted her head, her skepticism battling with her newfound awe.

"Is that so? Then you've reached the first class advancement, at least."

Damon's eye twitched, but he quickly composed himself.

"No... but—"

"Then we have nothing more to talk about."

Damon blinked, startled by her abrupt dismissal.

'What... huh... this girl.'

He chuckled lightly, regaining his composure.

"I suppose you haven't heard of people like me. I'm actually the most well-known student in my year. All the professors had their eyes on me."

'Although they despise me now.'

Iris sneered, her skepticism returning in full force.

"So what? You're just some guy."

Damon bit the inside of his cheek, suppressing his irritation.

"Tell you what... wanna make two hundred thousand zeni?"

Her brows shot up. "I'm not interested in selling myself into prostitution, sorry."

He suppressed the urge to groan, his patience wearing thin.

'What the hell do nobles think prostitution is? Prostitution would have been cheaper.'

He raised his Academy-issued pager, the device glowing faintly in his hand.

"Let's duel. If you win, I'll give you two hundred thousand zeni. If you lose, you become my apprentice."

Iris sneered again, crossing her arms.

"As if. Do I look crazy? Why would I take on an Academy student in a magical duel? That's suicide."

Damon smiled, unfazed.

'Good, she's interested. Running this house must cost her a money. I imagine she doesn't want to live off people's charity forever.'

"Oh, but there's a caveat. I won't use any magic at all."

'Because I suck at magic, with abysmal mana level' he thought bitterly, though his expression remained confident.

Iris narrowed her eyes, still skeptical but clearly tempted.

Damon decided to push her further.

"Or... you could stay here, living off the charity of the townspeople. I'll just take my money and go. This should be easy money for someone as capable as you. Unless you're scared. Unless you want to be a parasite your whole life."

Iris gritted her teeth, his words hitting a nerve.

Her hands flared with pink flames as she glared at him. "You're on."