

Living Shadow 86

Chapter 86 Won't Let Her Die...

The dim glow of the streetlamps barely illuminated the scene, their pale light struggling to penetrate the darkness of the night. Iris kept her gaze fixed on Damon, her resolve unwavering. Though his features were obscured by the blindfold he wore, she didn't need to see his eyes to gauge his abilities. He had agreed not to use magic, and he hadn't reached the first class advancement—victory was assured.

Her pink flames flickered brightly in the gloom, casting long shadows that danced across the cobblestones.

'If I win, I won't have to rely on what my father left behind... or worse, the pity of the townsfolk's charity.'

The thought steeled her determination.

Damon, on the other hand, stood relaxed, seemingly unbothered. Despite the blindfold, he could see perfectly, thanks to his shadow perception. The darkness was his ally, and the faint shadows cast by Iris' flames only enhanced his awareness.

'She doesn't stand a chance at night,' he mused, tightening his fists.

The shifting shadows around her betrayed the movements of her flames, making it almost laughably easy to anticipate where they would strike.

'Still, I hope this is the right decision...'

His shadow flickered briefly, as if disagreeing with his thoughts. Damon couldn't help but notice its subtle reproach.

'I'm not going back on my resolve,' he thought, determined. 'I'm just testing a different approach.'

"Okay, Iris. Are you ready?" he asked, his voice calm and steady.

Her flames flared brighter, the pink hue illuminating her fierce expression.

"More than ready. You're going down, creep!"

Damon sighed, his tone laced with mock pity.

"No need to hurt my feelings. I'll be sure to hold back so I don't hurt you."

'Lies,' he admitted to himself.

He fully intended to go all out, even without magic. Taking on someone using magic without countering with his own was a risky move—one only a fool would attempt unless they'd reached the first class advancement, where their physical body surpassed human limits. Thankfully, Damon wasn't relying on human strength alone.

He had the [5x] skill

Iris stood poised, awaiting the signal, her flames coiling around her hands like eager serpents.

"On the count of three," Damon began, his voice carrying the tension in the air. "One... two... three!"

Before he could finish the count, Iris unleashed a blazing torrent of pink flames. The heat surged toward him like a tidal wave, fierce and unrelenting.

Reacting instantly, Damon shot the omnidirectional gear toward the wall behind her. The hook latched onto the stone with a metallic clink, and the tension in the wires grew taut as he activated the mechanism.

He underestimated the gear's pull force—again.

Instead of smoothly launching himself to safety, Damon was yanked off his feet like a rag doll, the flames narrowly missing him as he hurtled forward. Momentum carried him straight into Iris, his head colliding with her stomach.

"Gah!" she gasped, the impact forcing the breath from her lungs. The force sent them both crashing into the wall behind her with a resounding thud.

Damon groaned, his head pounding from the collision. He shook it off and staggered to his feet, holding his temple.

"Ouch... my head..."

He glanced down and froze. Iris lay slumped against the wall, completely unconscious. Her pink hair framed her delicate face, now devoid of the fiery determination she'd shown moments earlier.

"...Uh oh," he muttered, staring at her limp form. "I didn't mean to do that."

From the corner of his eye, he saw his shadow shift. It moved to the wall and mimicked a facepalm, the silent gesture oozing exasperation.

"Not a word," Damon grumbled, glaring at the shadow. He crouched down, inspecting Iris to ensure she was unharmed.

'She's just knocked out. Good. I'd rather avoid explaining this if she were seriously hurt.'

Standing up, he retracted the gear's hook, which zipped back into the bracer with a faint click. He looked down at the unconscious girl once more and sighed.

"This isn't how I pictured this duel going," he muttered, rubbing the back of his neck awkwardly.

Damon chuckled awkwardly as a raven swooped down from a nearby tree branch, landing squarely on Iris's unconscious form. The bird tilted its head, its beady eyes glinting in the dim light, and pecked at her lightly with its beak.

"Caw caw! Dead! Dead! Killer! Killer!" the raven squawked, its mocking voice cutting through the silence.

"Shut up, you stupid bird! She's still alive!" Damon hissed, swatting Croft away. The raven flapped its wings indignantly, retreating a few feet but not leaving entirely.

Damon's heart thundered in his chest, his mind racing. Everything had happened so fast—too fast. His remorseless skill hadn't even activated, likely because he hadn't truly seen the exchange as a battle. But that didn't excuse the reckless blunder he'd made.

He glanced at the unconscious girl again, guilt creeping into his thoughts.

'Using a tool I haven't mastered in a fight... what was I thinking?'

Croft let out another caw, as if taunting him. "Dead! Dead!"

Damon's stomach twisted. He clenched his fists, trying to push away the memories. He had killed her father—unwillingly, but it didn't change the fact that his hands were stained. He didn't want any more harm to come to her. He didn't want her to die, especially not by his hand.

'And I won't let anyone else kill her either,' he vowed silently.

In a corner of his heart, a small, selfish voice whispered that this resolve wasn't entirely noble. Perhaps that was why his shadow seemed so disapproving of this entire arrangement.

He crouched down beside her, his sharp eyes scanning her still form. She was breathing, the faint rise and fall of her chest evident. But just to be certain, he leaned closer, pressing two fingers gently against her neck to check her pulse.

Her heartbeat was steady, but Damon hesitated, lowering his ear to her chest. The softness of her frame pressed against his head as he confirmed her heart's rhythm.

From the corner of his vision, his shadow shifted, forming a gesture that clearly resembled a shake of disapproval. It then pointed directly at him, as if to say, Was that last part really necessary?

Damon shrugged, smirking faintly. "Better safe than sorry."

Satisfied that she was okay, he straightened and exhaled a sigh of relief. Gently, he picked her up, cradling her in his arms. Her pink hair cascaded over her shoulder, and for a moment, he was struck by how fragile she seemed.

'At least I get to keep my money,' he thought, a small consolation amidst his guilt.

The door to her house creaked open as he nudged it with his foot, stepping into the dimly lit kitchen. His shadow spread out ahead of him, scanning the house to locate her room, but Damon halted it mid-search.

'Taking a girl I just met into her room? Yeah, no. Not a great idea—especially after she threatened to scream pervert earlier.'

Sighing, he carried her to the living room instead. A large, plush sofa caught his eye, and he carefully placed her down on it. He pulled a blanket from a nearby armchair and draped it over her unconscious form.

Taking a seat on a wooden chair by the fireplace, Damon leaned back, watching the flickering flames cast long, dancing shadows across the room. Croft landed on the armrest beside him, cocking its head expectantly. Damon tore a piece of dried meat from his pouch and handed it to the raven, who cawed in approval.

"This is going to take a while," Damon muttered under his breath.

The stillness of the room was interrupted by the faint vibration of his pager. He pulled it from his pocket, flipping it open. The name on the display made his heart skip a beat.

"Damn," he whispered, gripping the pager tightly.