

ShadowBound 108

Chapter 108: Not Here

As Liam stepped into the cafeteria, he was struck by the eerie silence that filled the expansive space.

Rows of tables and chairs sat empty, the usual chatter and commotion absent. The only sounds came from the far end, where the kitchen staff—ladies of varying ages—were engrossed in a lively conversation.

Liam's eyes scanned the room, confirming what he already suspected. Not a single student in sight.

'Everyone must've left for the instructor-led training,' he mused. A small smile tugged at the corner of his lips. 'Good. I prefer the quiet anyway.'

He approached the counter with his usual unhurried pace, his footsteps the only noise cutting through the stillness. The ladies, initially oblivious to his presence, stopped mid-conversation when they heard his calm, measured voice.

"Good afternoon," Liam greeted, his tone polite and composed.

The staff turned to him, a mix of surprise and amusement flickering in their eyes. Most of the cafeteria ladies were middle-aged, their demeanor warm but professional. However, one stood out—Layla.

In her late twenties, with striking hazel eyes and a figure that turned heads, Layla had a reputation for her unabashed interest in Liam. And today was no different. As soon as she spotted him, her lips curled into a mischievous smile that seemed to be reserved just for him.

"Well, well, if it isn't my favorite charming boy," Layla purred, leaning casually on the counter, her elbows resting on the surface. "How are you doing today?"

Liam's expression remained as stoic as ever, unfazed by her teasing. "I'm doing quite well. I came to get something to eat."

From the back, two older staff members exchanged amused glances.

"There she goes again, flirting with that poor innocent boy," one whispered, her voice dripping with mock exasperation.

"Everyone has their tastes, I suppose," another replied, chuckling as she wiped a tray.

Layla ignored them, her attention solely on Liam. "Mmm, you know you're late, right? We've already cleared out most of the trays. Are you trying to make us work overtime just for you?"

"I apologize for being a nuisance," Liam replied evenly. "I know you're supposed to be resting."

Layla's teasing grin widened, her eyes glinting. "Oh, don't apologize, sweetheart. It's good to have a bit of bad boy in you sometimes, you know." Her voice dipped slightly, playful and suggestive, as she bit her lower lip.

Behind her, the other ladies stifled their laughter.

"Layla, honestly," one called out, shaking her head. "Could you try not to flirt with someone young enough to be your little brother?"

"He's not my little brother," Layla shot back with a wink, not missing a beat. "And if you're jealous, just say so."

The room erupted in a round of chuckles, but Layla waved them off with a carefree gesture. She turned back to Liam, grabbing a clean tray and serving him a generous portion of the remaining food.

"There you go, darling," she said with a cheeky smile. "Enjoy. And don't be a stranger, alright?"

"Thank you," Liam replied, his voice still neutral. He picked up the tray and walked off, scanning the empty cafeteria for a seat.

Layla watched him retreat, a satisfied smirk on her lips.

"Honestly, Layla, you're incorrigible," one of the older ladies teased, crossing her arms. "The way you fawn over that boy, you'd think you were back in high school."

Layla shrugged, unbothered by their teasing. "What can I say? He's cute, and I like a man who can keep his cool."

"Cute, sure," another chimed in with a laugh. "But if he ever talks back, don't come crying to us."

Layla waved them off dismissively. "Relax, ladies. He's harmless. Besides," she added, her tone turning sly, "I'm just keeping things interesting."

Meanwhile, Liam settled into a corner seat, far from the counter. The cafeteria's emptiness felt strangely peaceful.

As Liam decided to begin eating, the peaceful silence of the cafeteria was shattered by an unwelcome voice.

"Hello... peasant."

Chris's voice carried a sharp edge as he slammed his hand on the table, the impact echoing through the empty hall.

Liam paused mid-motion, the spoon inches from his mouth. He stayed still for a moment, as if weighing his options, before calmly resuming his meal, completely ignoring Chris's presence.

The dismissive gesture only fueled the tension. Logan stepped closer, his voice filled with venom. "The prince is talking to you, you lowly piece of trash."

But Liam remained unfazed, methodically eating as though they weren't even there.

"How dare you ignore royalty!" Logan snarled, raising his fist, ready to strike.

Before he could act, Chris caught his arm mid-air, his grip firm but casual. "Relax, Logan," he said, his voice dripping with false calm. "No need to get all jumpy... yet."

Chris's dark smirk widened as he turned his attention back to Liam, who still refused to acknowledge him.

"Well, it seems you're not willing to talk because you're eating," Chris mused aloud. His voice was light, but there was a dangerous glint in his eyes. "If that's the case, I believe there's only one way to solve this."

In one swift motion, Chris swept Liam's tray off the table, sending its contents flying to the floor. The clattering sound of the tray echoed in the empty cafeteria.

"...to wait for you to finish. Oh, look!" Chris sneered, his laugh cold and biting. "Guess you're done."

He stood back, clearly expecting an outburst, some sign of anger or frustration from Liam. But the reaction he anticipated never came.

Liam remained seated, his face as calm and impassive as ever. His lack of reaction wiped the grin off Chris's face, replacing it with a flicker of annoyance.

"I see," Chris said, his voice dropping an octave. "It takes more than that to crack that composure of yours, huh?"

The room grew tense as Chris stepped forward, grabbing the edge of the table. With a single powerful motion, he flipped it over, the metal legs screeching against the tiled floor.

Even this failed to provoke Liam. He sat still for a few moments, his eyes moving from the upturned table to the scattered remains of his food on the floor. Then, with a soft sigh, he rose to his feet.

"You know, Chris," Liam said, his voice calm but carrying a quiet weight, "I'm really not in the mood for your games today. And also..." He gestured to the mess on the floor. "Why make a fuss in a place that was just cleaned by the workers? Is that really necessary?"

Chris's lips twisted into a sneer, a dark chuckle escaping him. "Pfft, don't tell me..." His voice dripped with mockery. "You're not angry about losing your food but because my actions made these useless old hags' work meaningless?"

Chris burst out laughing, and Logan and Lucian joined in, their laughter ringing hollow in the empty space.

"You're actually funnier than I thought," Chris said, wiping an imaginary tear from the corner of his eye. "Even more than that pathetic clown of a joker."

His laughter abruptly stopped as he stepped closer to Liam, his expression hardening into a cold, menacing glare.

"But let me tell you one thing," he hissed, his voice low and dangerous. "Don't ever tell me to reflect on my actions because of some lowly bunch of old hags. Got that?"

'Fighting here might lead to consequences from the authorities, and I can't afford to let this nonsense interfere with my training sessions,' he thought, his gaze fixed on Chris, whose smug grin only deepened the tension.

'Moreover, these three aren't just mere students. They're dangerous in their own way, and I doubt the fear tactic I used on Sheila would work here.'

For a fleeting moment, Liam's gaze shifted toward the cafeteria counter, where the serving ladies stood frozen, their attention undoubtedly drawn to the brewing confrontation.

'They're watching,' Liam thought. 'I can't cause trouble for them after they've worked so hard to clean. They might have seen what's happening, but stepping in is another story entirely. Interrupting a royal like Chris comes with consequences they're not ready to face.'

The silence from the counter was deafening, their eyes silently pleading for Liam to keep things from escalating. He let out another soft sigh, his shoulders relaxing slightly as he shifted his focus back to Chris.

"You know, Chris," he began, his tone level but deliberate, "why don't we take this somewhere else? I mean, this place isn't exactly big enough to contain all four of us if things get... heated."

Chris narrowed his eyes, his pride stung. "Look at this thing," he spat, his voice dripping with disdain. "Telling me what to do. Go somewhere else? How dare you?"

But Liam didn't flinch. Instead, he leaned slightly closer, his voice dropping just enough to make it sound like a private conversation while still loud enough for Chris's two lackeys to hear. "Come on, Chris. We both know how this ends if we stay here."

Chris tilted his head, his curiosity piqued despite himself.

Liam smirked faintly, the first crack in his stoic demeanor. "Think about it," he said smoothly. "If we fight here, all it takes is one of those ladies to report it to the administration. You know how quick the authorities are to pounce on anything that disrupts their 'perfect academy image.'"

Chris's frown deepened, but he didn't interrupt. Enjoy new stories from empire

"You're royalty, sure," Liam continued, his tone casual but laced with just enough insinuation to needle Chris's ego. "But even royals don't get away unscathed when it comes to public disturbances. And what happens if word spreads? People might start questioning why Prince Chris needed his two minions to back him up against a 'nobody' like me."

Logan and Lucian exchanged uneasy glances, their earlier bravado faltering.

Liam leaned back slightly, placing his hands in his pockets. "But hey, if you're fine with people thinking you need a full team to deal with someone like me, we can stay here. I don't mind. I'm sure the ladies wouldn't either—they'd love some free entertainment."

Chris's jaw clenched, his pride warring with his desire to make Liam suffer.

"Or," Liam added, shrugging nonchalantly, "we head somewhere private. Somewhere where you can really prove you're as tough as you say. No interruptions, no reports, no rumors. Just you, me, and your little entourage here. You decide."

Chris's lips curled into a sneer, his pride demanding he assert dominance. Yet, Liam's words lingered, stoking his need to maintain his image. After a tense moment, Chris took a step back, his smirk returning.

"Fine," Chris said, his voice filled with false magnanimity. "Let's go somewhere private. But don't think for a second that I'm doing this because you suggested it. I just don't want these old bats crying about their precious cafeteria."

He gestured for Logan and Lucian to follow, turning his back on Liam. "Lead the way, peasant. Let's see how far you'll go before I break that fake composure of yours."