

ShadowBound 116

Chapter 116: Blood Attack

Liam calmly trailed behind the guards as they exited the mansion and headed toward a sleek black carriage waiting in the moonlit courtyard. The air outside was crisp, a welcome change from the oppressive warmth of the festivities.

As they approached the carriage, one of the knights—a burly man with a grizzled beard and an air of authority—cast a sharp glance over his shoulder at Liam. "Make sure you don't slow us down, kid. This may be just a search for Lady Elena, but we don't have time for distractions or any hindrance to our mission," he said, his tone firm and laced with annoyance.

Liam's eyes flicked toward the knight, his expression calm, unreadable. 'Seems this man isn't thrilled about me tagging along,' he thought, taking a quick measure of the knight's stature and demeanor.

"Understood," Liam replied coolly, his voice flat and disinterested. "I'll do my best to be helpful."

The knight huffed, clearly unimpressed, but said no more.

Liam stepped into the carriage with the guards, taking a seat in the corner, his posture relaxed as the horses began to trot. His gaze drifted toward the window, watching the sprawling estate fade into the distance. The flickering lamplight from the courtyard reflected faintly in his eyes, but his mind was elsewhere.

'I couldn't care less about this little search mission or the scowls these knights are throwing my way,' he mused, glancing briefly at the armored men sitting stiffly across from him. 'They're all so rigid, so bound by rules and formality. How suffocating.'

He leaned back, his arms crossed loosely. 'Still, this is far better than being stuck in that ballroom, surrounded by preening nobles and their endless chatter.'

The cool night air that filtered into the carriage was refreshing, a stark contrast to the stifling atmosphere of the festivities. 'Fresh air, a quiet night, and perhaps a bit of action if we're lucky. Not a bad trade.'

The carriage bumped slightly as it traveled along the dirt path leading to the forest. Liam could hear the faint murmur of the guards discussing their strategy, though he paid little attention. He glanced at the faint glow of the moon outside, his thoughts growing more detached.

'Elena better not be too far. I'd hate for this little detour to become an actual hassle.'

One of the younger guards, perhaps sensing the tension, glanced at Liam and offered a half-hearted attempt at conversation. "So, uh, what made you volunteer for this, anyway? You don't look like the type to get involved."

Liam was silent for a bit, his gaze still fixed out the window. "I enjoy a good walk," he said, his tone dry.

The younger guard blinked, clearly uncertain whether Liam was serious or mocking him. Before he could reply, the grizzled knight shot him a sharp look, effectively silencing him.

As the carriage neared the edge of the forest, the light chatter among the guards faded, replaced by a growing sense of focus.

Liam straightened slightly, his eyes narrowing as he peered into the dense woods ahead. The faint unease in the air didn't escape him.

As the carriage came to a halt, the guards disembarked with synchronized precision, their heavy boots hitting the ground in unison. Liam followed suit, stepping down onto the soft earth with a calm, deliberate pace. The moon above cast a faint silver glow, illuminating the outlines of the surrounding trees.

"We're splitting up," the grizzled knight began, his gravelly voice cutting through the silence. "Oscar, you and those two head south. Victor, you take the other two north. I'll head west to the cliff with the kid here. We don't know exactly where Lady Elena is, so sticking together would be a waste of time. If any of you find anything suspicious, send up a signal."

The other guards nodded in agreement, their armor shifting with quiet clinks.

"Good. Now disperse," the knight ordered with finality.

Turning toward the carriage driver, he added, "You wait here, Paul. We shouldn't be long."

The driver, an older man with a weathered face, tipped his hat. "No need to worry. I'll be right here."

The knight turned his sharp gaze to Liam. "And you—make sure you don't fall behind."

Liam didn't respond, his face remaining impassive as he followed the knight into the forest.

The forest grew darker with every step. Branches twisted and gnarled above, blotting out much of the moonlight. The only sounds were the faint crunch of boots against fallen leaves and the occasional rustle in the underbrush. As they began ascending the gradual incline of a hill, Liam's unease deepened.

'Something about this place is wrong.'

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The air felt heavy, almost suffocating. A strange, rancid scent lingered—one that seemed to thicken the deeper they ventured. Liam glanced at the knight ahead of him, Vlar, who moved with steady, unbothered strides.

How is he not noticing this? Liam thought, his instincts flaring like a warning bell.

The further they climbed, the worse it got. The air felt alive, pressing down on him like an unseen hand.

"Sir," Liam said finally, breaking the silence.

"What is it?" Vlar shot back without turning around, his tone edged with both irritation and amusement. "Scared already?"

Liam's voice remained calm. "I think we should hurry. Something doesn't feel right."

"If you're scared, kid, just go back and wait in the carriage," Vlar retorted, his tone dismissive. "We'll handle the rest."

Liam said nothing further. There was no point arguing. He simply tightened his steps, walking close behind the knight as they pushed on.

After a few minutes, the forest opened up to reveal the cliff—a rocky ledge overlooking the city below. The stars hung heavy in the sky, their light spilling softly across the ground. There, near the edge, a small figure sat on the grass, illuminated by the soft glow of a lantern.

"Lady Elena," Vlar called out, his voice low but firm as he slowed his approach.

The girl turned, her delicate features illuminated by the lantern light. Her dark curls framed her face as she smiled softly, clearly unsurprised by their arrival. "Hey there, Vlar. Come to collect me already?"

"Yes, my lady," Vlar said, his tone gentler than before. "Your mother is very worried."

Elena huffed softly as she stood, brushing dust from her gown. "Mother always worries. She doesn't understand how freeing it is to be out here. But I suppose it was only a matter of time before someone came to fetch me."

"Regardless, we should get you back. It's dangerous out here at this hour," Vlar said, stepping closer.

"Dangerous? Vlar, I've been coming here for ages," Elena replied, a hint of defiance in her voice. Her gaze shifted, however, as she noticed Liam standing quietly behind Vlar. Her brow furrowed slightly. "Who's this?"

Vlar stepped aside to gesture toward Liam. "This is a guest from Mrs Avanclore's gathering. He volunteered to assist in the search. He's only a year or two older than you."

Elena tilted her head, studying Liam with curious eyes. "He looks... stoic." She stepped closer, her expression softening. "What's your name?"

Liam didn't respond, his gaze flickering briefly toward her before scanning the surrounding area.

"Hey," Vlar snapped. "Lady Elena asked you a question. Answer her."

"I'm sorry," Liam said calmly, his voice devoid of apology, "but I think we should leave—now. Something isn't right here."

Vlar gave Liam a sharp glare but quickly turned to Elena. "Lady Elena, we should return to the carriage immediately."

Elena, sensing the sudden shift in tone, nodded. "Fine. Lead the way."

As they began to walk away from the cliff, ready to descend the hill, Liam felt it—an abrupt, crushing weight in the air. The already oppressive atmosphere turned suffocating, drenched in a malicious, almost palpable presence.

Then came the voice.

"How dare you try to take our food away?"

The words dripped with malice, a guttural growl that reverberated through the night.

Vlar spun around, his hand instinctively moving to the hilt of his sword. "Who's there? Show yourself! Before I turne you into pieces!"

A cruel, mocking laugh echoed through the trees, chilling in its amusement.

"You? A mere breath of a human? Turn us to pieces?"

From atop a nearby boulder, a figure emerged, bathed in the silver glow of the moon. His crimson skin shimmered faintly, his grin wide and lined with needle-like teeth. His yellow eyes glowed with predatory hunger as he surveyed the three of them.

The older blood demon tilted his head, his voice smooth and venomous. "How fascinating."

'A demon? Here in the capital?' Vlar's mind raced as his instincts kicked in, and he unsheathed his sword in one swift motion.

"Lady Elena, stay behind me! Don't move!" he barked, his voice filled with urgency.

His grip on the sword tightened as his eyes darted around, taking in the unsettling grin of the older demon on the boulder. 'The others... I need to send the signal now!' But as Vlar raised his free hand to summon the flare, a sinister chuckle echoed from above.

The sound was low and guttural, dripping with malice.

Vlar and Liam both looked up. Perched on a thick branch of a nearby tree, the younger demon crouched like a predatory beast. His claws glistened wet with blood, which dripped steadily onto the ground. His maw was stained crimson, and his sharp teeth glinted in the moonlight.

"You humans never cease to amaze me," the demon sneered, his voice a blend of mockery and glee. "You want to put up a fight, yet your 'comrades' are all already dead. Even that poor old man with the horses—what was his name? Ah, yes, Paul."

The words struck like a hammer. Vlar's face turned pale as the demon's meaning sank in.

Paul? Dead?

"You... you monsters..." Vlar growled, his voice trembling with fury. Slowly, his expression hardened, and an emerald glow began to surround him. His myst flared, wild and unrestrained, as his anger surged. "How dare you touch my people... Paul... I swear on my life, I'll—"

But the words caught in his throat.

Vlar froze, his eyes wide and disbelieving. Blood spilled from his mouth, trailing down his chin as his strength faltered. His legs wavered, and he staggered. Slowly, he looked down at his body.

The sight was horrifying.

The left side of his abdomen was gone, torn away as though bitten by some massive beast. Flesh hung loosely from the gaping wound, and blood gushed freely, soaking his armor and the ground beneath him.

Vlar fell to his knees with a choked gasp, his sword slipping from his trembling hand. Blood pooled around him as his breathing slowed. Within moments, his body collapsed, lifeless, onto the forest floor.

Elena screamed, her hands flying to her mouth as she stumbled back.

The older demon stepped forward, wiping his bloody maw with his free hand. His left hand, glistening red and dripping, was evidence of the deadly strike that had ended Vlar's life.

"Food with a fighting spirit loses its flavor quickly," the older demon said with a cruel smile, his deep voice calm and cold. "It's better to deal with it swiftly."