

ShadowBound 132

Chapter 132: What's Her Affinity?

After the session ended, the students filed back to their respective dressing rooms to change. In the boys' dressing room, the usual banter between Asher and Dylan was in full swing, their voices echoing off the tiled walls. Occasionally, they tried to rope Liam into their antics, but his focus was elsewhere. His thoughts churned with questions he couldn't shake.

The sparring match with Charlotte had left him deep in contemplation. Her sheer strength, speed, and precision were etched into his mind. Liam prided himself on his speed and control with his daggers—he didn't need anyone to tell him he was skilled. But Charlotte's raw force and agility were on an entirely different level, almost twice that of a human's capacity. And worse, he could tell she'd been holding back.

"What affinity could she possibly have?" Liam mused, buttoning his uniform shirt absentmindedly. "For someone to wield such power so naturally... It's not just skill. There's something more there."

The thoughts didn't stop. He had come into weaponry training with confidence, planning to coast through the physical lessons while focusing more on theory. But that spar had been a wake-up call.

"Mediocre," Liam thought bitterly. "Not that I'm bad, but there are students here who can outclass me in areas I assumed I dominated. Draven's style—go in for the kill at any opening—is satisfying and has kept me alive. But here? It won't be enough. Not if Magnus can actually teach me something worth knowing."

"Oi, Liam!" Dylan's voice broke through his thoughts. "Zoning out again? Don't tell me Charlotte's already got you wrapped around her finger." He gave a mockingly exaggerated grin, wagging his eyebrows.

Liam glanced at him, his expression flat. "I'd prefer if you didn't say that."

"Understood, sir!" Dylan said with a laugh, snapping a mock salute. "But seriously, if you keep spacing out like that, that's the only conclusion I'm gonna come to, hehe."

"Quit being dumb, you idiot. He might be a weakling but I doubt he will have his mind occupied by a girl." Asher chimed in, delivering a sharp smack to Dylan's neck.

"Ow! What the hell, man?" Dylan whined, rubbing the spot with an exaggerated pout.

"I don't know." Asher shrugged, a smirk creeping onto his face. "I think I just enjoy smacking you now."

Dylan grinned, turning back to Asher. "Wow, you know what? That might actually be the nicest thing you've ever said about Liam since we've known each other."

"Shut up, idiot," Asher snapped, his face flushing slightly.

Liam watched the exchange with detached amusement, buttoning the last of his shirt as their bickering continued.

Eventually, the three of them exited the dressing room, ready to head back to their quarters and clean up. While the dressing room did have showers, the sheer number of guys willing to strip down and pile in made it uncomfortably crowded. Asher, ever the blunt one, had taken to calling them "untamed baboons," a label that had stuck among their group.

"Not gonna lie," Dylan said as they walked out. "Those baboons are brave. Showering in that jungle is not for the faint of heart."

"Brave isn't the word," Asher muttered. "It's reckless. And gross."

As the trio walked back to their quarters, the chatter between Dylan and Asher continued, but Liam remained quiet, his thoughts elsewhere.

"Seriously though," Dylan said, nudging Liam, "you gonna let Charlotte keep calling you 'Bae'? Sounds like she's already claimed you."

"Drop it," Liam replied curtly, not even glancing at him.

"Yeah, Dylan," Asher chimed in. "He's probably too weak to handle her anyway."

Dylan laughed. "Says the guy who couldn't last two minutes against her."

"You want to find out how long you'd last against me?" Asher shot back, his tone sharp.

"Relax, man. Just joking," Dylan said, holding up his hands defensively.

Liam sighed inwardly. "Do these two ever stop?"

They parted ways at the dorms, each heading to their rooms to clean up.

Back in his room, Liam sat cross-legged in the center, focusing on Myst Recovery to replenish his depleted reserves. Though he had been practicing this since waking up the day before, the expansion of his core required extra time and effort to restore the Myst he'd lost in the past three days.

The weaponry training had ended an hour before sunset, and now Liam, shirtless as usual, wore only his pants as he remained in a meditative pose. His breathing was steady, his focus sharp, until a sharp knock on his door broke his concentration.

Liam opened his eyes, exhaling slowly before rising to answer. Standing in the doorway was Naya, a pile of neatly folded clothes in her hands.

"Good evening, Liam. I've brought your washed clothes and came to collect the dirty ones," Naya said with a polite bow.

"Thank you," Liam replied, taking the clean clothes from her. He turned and placed them into his wardrobe before gesturing toward the basket of dirty laundry. "I'm about to take a bath. You can come in and grab the dirty clothes."

"No problem," Naya said as she stepped inside.

Liam disappeared into the bathroom, leaving her to handle the basket. As she picked up his clothes, her eyes lingered on the faint scars that crisscrossed his back, visible for the first time.

"Did he always have those scars?" she wondered, frowning slightly. Though she had been assigned to Liam for the past two months and seen him shirtless plenty of times—something she admittedly enjoyed more than she should—she had never noticed his back before, let alone the marks.

"It's none of my business," she told herself firmly. "I should just hurry before anyone thinks I'm committing some sort of taboo."

With that thought, Naya quickly gathered the laundry and left the room, her cheeks slightly flushed as she shut the door behind her.

Liam made his way to the cafeteria, hunger gnawing at him after the long day of training. As he scanned the room for an open seat, Dylan waved him over to a table where he sat with Asher, Ariana, and Sheila. Reluctantly, Liam joined them, sliding into the seat directly across from Ariana.

The moment Liam sat down, Ariana stiffened, her usual composure faltering. Sitting opposite him made her feel oddly exposed, and her cheeks flushed ever so slightly. She tried to focus on her plate, feigning indifference, but her discomfort was apparent—at least to Dylan. He smirked knowingly but chose not to tease her, too busy arguing with Asher.

"I'm telling you, blue flames are more impressive than that flashy wind junk you always go on about," Asher said, leaning forward with a smirk.

"Ha! Keep dreaming, Flame Boy," Dylan shot back. "Wind can extinguish flames, you know. Science, my dude."

"You're lucky I don't fry you right here," Asher growled, rolling his eyes.

Meanwhile, Sheila sat quietly, occasionally sneaking glances at Liam. Unlike Ariana, her expression was one of quiet admiration and respect. But even she wasn't immune to a faint flush of color when Liam's crimson eyes suddenly met hers, causing her to quickly avert her gaze.

Just as the group settled into a lull, Charlotte sauntered into the cafeteria, her presence immediately drawing attention. Without hesitation, she strolled over and claimed the spot right beside Liam, her confident smile lighting up her face.

"Hope you don't mind, bae," she said casually, leaning slightly into Liam's space as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

Liam gave Charlotte a sidelong glance, his stoic expression unchanged. "I do mind," he muttered, his voice low enough that only she could hear.

Charlotte chuckled softly, brushing off his words as she settled into her seat. "Too bad. I'm already here," she replied with a teasing grin, resting her chin on her hand as she looked at him.

Across the table, Ariana's discomfort only grew. She glanced at Charlotte, then back at Liam, feeling an unexplainable twinge of annoyance at how easily Charlotte seemed to fit into his space. 'Are they like old friends or something.' Ariana thought in her innocent mind.

As the meal continued, Charlotte leaned closer to Liam, resting her head on his shoulder and sighing dramatically. "You know, I think I've had enough of sitting across from you. Much better here." She smiled up at him, clearly enjoying the close proximity, while Liam remained indifferent, his gaze drifting towards his food.

Ariana, sitting opposite Liam, could feel her face flush each time Charlotte got too close. She quickly turned her attention to her plate, trying to hide the uncomfortable twinge in her chest. Every time Charlotte looked at Liam or touched him, Ariana's gaze would flicker between them, her expression betraying a quiet jealousy she couldn't quite shake.

"Must you be so... clingy?" Liam muttered under his breath, mostly to himself, though Charlotte heard it clearly.

"Clingy?" Charlotte grinned, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. "I just like being near you, that's all."

Ariana looked down at her plate, her cheeks pink. She glanced at Liam again, but he seemed oblivious to her discomfort, his focus on his food. The tension was thick, and she had to force herself to stop glancing up.

Finally, as the conversation carried on, Liam's mind drifted to the lingering question he had about Charlotte. He turned toward her and, without warning, asked, "What's your affinity, Charlotte?"

Charlotte blinked, clearly caught off guard by the question. She tilted her head, her playful grin faltering for just a moment. "Oh? You want to know? Well, if I tell you, will I get a kiss as a reward?" she asked, raising an eyebrow, her tone teasing.

Liam, unfazed, shook his head. "No."

Charlotte pouted for a moment, crossing her arms and looking a little disappointed. "Tough crowd," she muttered before pausing. "Alright, fine, I'll tell you." She sat up straight, her teasing expression turning serious. "My affinity is Beast Magic."