

ShadowBound 147

Chapter 147: We Are Rivals

For the rest of the night, Asher drilled Liam relentlessly in the art of Flame Concentration, pushing him far beyond his comfort zone. With each attempt, Asher offered sharp critiques and occasionally demonstrated the technique himself, giving Liam a clearer understanding.

Despite the focus on teaching, even Asher found himself refining his own skills as they went, their training naturally evolving into a series of impromptu spars.

Under Asher's guidance, Liam managed to channel his myst into his fists and feet, creating concentrated bursts of flames. While the power of his strikes wasn't nearly on par with Asher's, it was a promising start—enough to make Asher smirk with begrudging approval.

At one point, Asher paused to explain a critical distinction between Flame Concentration and Flame Compression.

"Listen up, weakling," Asher began, wiping sweat from his brow. "Flame Concentration happens inside the body. You channel myst, accumulate it in a specific area, and release it as focused firepower. It's about precision and flow. But Flame Compression? That's different."

"How so?" Liam asked, his breath still ragged from the last round.

"Flame Compression happens outside the body. Instead of channeling myst, you compress the flame itself, packing it into a denser, more devastating form. It's raw power. With this, you can even create solid flame constructs, like a sword or a staff." Asher's tone turned smug. "Both techniques share a similar principle, but Compression? That's where things get really dangerous."

Liam nodded, processing the explanation. The concept intrigued him—especially the versatility of Flame Compression.

As the first rays of dawn stretched across the training ground, both young men collapsed against a nearby wall, their bodies drenched in sweat and their breaths labored. The arena around them bore the evidence of their training: scorch marks littered the ground, the air thick with vapor and the faint scent of burnt earth.

"Hey, Buzz Cut," Liam said between breaths, breaking the silence.

"What, weakling?" Asher shot back, his chest heaving.

"Why drag me all the way out here to teach me something this valuable?" Liam asked, his eyes fixed on the slowly brightening sky. "With how competitive you are, you could've kept this technique to yourself. It would've given you a huge edge when we start training with Galen again."

Asher clicked his tongue, turning his head to glare at Liam. "Don't make it sound so disgusting, idiot. First of all, I didn't do this for you. This was for me. Teaching you helps me improve too, and waiting for the exams to be over before Galen showed this to you would only slow my progress."

Liam quirked an eyebrow. "And second?"

Asher smirked, his competitive fire blazing anew. "Second, I don't want to hear you whining after I crush the battlefield exams because I had this technique in my favor. I want no excuses. So now that I've shown it to you..." He leaned forward, his voice sharp. "...you better give those exams everything you've got. Because regardless of whether we're on the same team or not, I'm surpassing you. I'm going further beyond. Got that?"

Liam turned to look at Asher, momentarily surprised by the blunt honesty. A faint smirk played on his lips. "You're pretty confident for someone who's not even facing me at full strength."

"Oh, spare me the drama," Asher retorted, rolling his eyes. "You've got dual affinities, sure. But let's not kid ourselves—you're not using dark magic in front of a crowd. I know how people view your kind. You're more likely to hold back."

Liam's expression shifted, his smirk fading as his usual stoic demeanor returned. "Since you're so aware of that, why help me at all?"

Asher forced himself to stand, his legs shaky but his resolve firm. "Listen, Hunter. The world doesn't revolve around you. My family doesn't have some grudge against dark magic users like the rest of the sheep out there. Sure, people view your kind as 'second-rate demons,' but me?" He scoffed. "I couldn't care less. What I care about is strength. They say you dark magic users are supposed to be on a different level—and that is all I care about."

He extended a hand to Liam, his eyes blazing with determination. "From now on, we're rivals. Whether we're on the same side or not, I'm coming for you. And don't even try to downplay your potential with that 'I'm not even in the top five' nonsense. Those so-called top five? Mediocre weaklings. They don't make my blood boil. But you, Hunter? You're different. You're worth the fight."

Liam stared at Asher for a long moment before finally taking the offered hand, his smirk returning, sharper than before. "Rivals, huh? Fine. Just don't come crying when you realize what you've signed up for."

After that, the two boys returned to their respective rooms to wash up. The cool water was a welcome relief against their aching muscles, rinsing away the grime and heat of their relentless training. Luckily for them, it was the weekend, granting them a much-needed reprieve to rest and recover.

As the morning sunlight filtered into the library, Ariana, Sheila, Charlotte, and Dylan were huddled around a cluttered table. Textbooks, scrolls, and hastily scribbled notes were scattered everywhere as they crammed for the looming theory exams. The atmosphere was surprisingly focused, with Ariana leading the charge, her glasses slipping slightly down her nose as she explained yet another concept.

But as she glanced around, something felt off.

"Has anyone seen Liam or Asher today?" Ariana asked, pushing her glasses back up with a finger, her tone tinged with curiosity.

Sheila shook her head, her expression amused. "Nope, haven't seen them since breakfast. And honestly? It's too quiet without Asher being a walking disaster."

Dylan leaned back in his chair, folding his arms with a grin. "You know, now that you mention it, maybe this is a rare blessing. No Asher means no flaming chaos. And Liam?... No Asher means no flaming chaos."

Charlotte smirked mischievously, twirling a strand of her curly hair. "Liam... my dear, broody bae." Her voice was dripping with teasing affection. "If I did see him, I'd probably be too distracted to care about even the exams. Picture sexy body, fresh out of the shower, droplets running down that chest, then to his abs before straight down to his..."

Ariana choked on her words, her face turning a bright shade of red. Sheila clamped a hand over her mouth, stifling a laugh, while Dylan nearly toppled out of his chair.

"For Heaven's sake, Charlotte!" Dylan exclaimed, pointing a finger at her as if scolding a child. "You're about as subtle as a boulder rolling downhill!"

Charlotte shrugged, utterly unbothered. "What can I say? I'm a woman of honesty. Admiring my bae isn't a crime, is it?"

Dylan shook his head in mock disbelief, a grin spreading across his face. "You know what? I'm just gonna embrace this. Being the only guy here is starting to feel like paradise. Who needs Asher and Liam anyway?"

Ariana rolled her eyes and flicked him on the forehead with a rolled-up scroll. "Focus, Dylan."

After thirty minutes of intense studying—and Dylan's focus steadily deteriorating—the library doors creaked open. The heavy, deliberate thud of boots echoed through the room, drawing all eyes to the entrance.

Galen strode in, his fiery eyes scanning the group. His composure was intact, but the subtle twitch in his jaw and his tightly clenched fists suggested otherwise.

"There you are," he said, his voice calm but laced with irritation.

"Uh, hi, Sir Galen!" Ariana greeted, a nervous smile spreading across her face. "What brings you here?"

Galen ignored the pleasantries and cut straight to the point. "Have any of you seen Asher?"

The group exchanged glances, each one growing more uneasy. Finally, Sheila spoke. "No, we haven't. Why? Did something happen?"

Galen let out a low growl, leaning over the table and planting his hands firmly on its surface. His fiery eyes bored into theirs. "If you see him, tell him to stay out of my sight. If I do see him, his face—and no, scratch that, his entire body—will look like my training ground."

Dylan raised an eyebrow, unable to resist. "Uh, okay, but... what's wrong with your training ground?"

Galen's glare intensified, ready to exaggerate. "Oh, just the usual. Scorch marks, shattered pillars, blackened floors—and, oh, a suspiciously lava-like pit. It now looks like the aftermath of a dragon having a meltdown."

Sheila blinked. "Wait... you're saying Asher did that?"

"Who else?" Galen snapped, running a hand through his perfectly styled white hair in exasperation. "Do you think someone volunteered to join him in wrecking my pristine training grounds? No one likes the meathead. Except maybe you, blondie." He gestured toward Dylan with a pointed look.

Dylan raised his hands defensively, grinning. "Hey, don't drag me into this. I'm all for chaos, but not lava-pit chaos."

Galen straightened, his coat swishing dramatically behind him as he turned to leave. "Just pass him the message. If I find him, not even Mystica's magic will put him back together."

As the doors swung shut behind him, the group sat in stunned silence for a moment.

"Well," Dylan said, breaking the tension with a grin, "looks like Asher found a creative way to spice up Galen's training ground. Honestly? I'm kind of impressed."

Ariana groaned, burying her face in her hands, while Charlotte smirked. Sheila sighed, glancing at the mess of notes on the table. "Let's just hope Galen cools off before he actually finds him."

Dylan leaned back, a playful gleam in his eye. "I'm betting ten of my exam points that when Asher shows up, he'll have zero idea why Galen's mad."

Everyone groaned in unison, knowing Dylan was probably right.