

ShadowBound 166

Chapter 166: Late Night Interuders

Later that night, the group stayed up a little longer before retiring to their makeshift earthen beds. After sharing a few laughs and casual conversations, they extinguished the fire, and one by one, everyone settled down for the night.

Liam lay on his back, staring at the uneven ceiling of the cave, unable to sleep. His attention kept returning to the strange dark object he'd taken earlier. The object, about the size of a mini football but irregular in shape, rested in his hand.

He tossed it into the air and caught it absently, his thoughts swirling. 'What the hell am I gonna use this for? Forge a sword? Tch. Not like I have any blacksmithing skills. But... maybe I could get someone to craft me a new pair of daggers with it.'

His gaze shifted to one of his daggers at his waist, and he drew it out, holding it up to the dim light. The blade gleamed faintly, showing signs of wear from frequent use.

'Draven's daggers...' Liam thought, running his fingers over the blade's edge. 'He used them himself before passing them to me, and I've been using them very frequently as well. They won't last much longer.'

For a moment, the image of his mentor's stern yet knowing face appeared in his mind. The memory lingered briefly before fading as Liam sighed, twirling the dagger skillfully before sliding it back into its sheath.

Without much thought, he slipped the dark object into his pocket. One unique feature of the academy's uniforms was their dimensional storage capabilities, allowing him to store the object securely.

Quietly, Liam sat up and padded toward the cave entrance. The crisp midnight air greeted him as he stepped out. Dressed in his uniform trousers and a black undershirt, he gazed up at the sky.

The moon in Vlardia was unique—large and silver with a smaller, dimmer moon orbiting just beneath it, casting an otherworldly glow over the landscape. Liam stood there in silence, hands in his pockets, letting the cool air brush against his skin as he closed his eyes.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here?"

Liam's eyes opened to see Lucian perched on a branch of a nearby tree, his figure outlined by the moonlight.

"..." Liam said nothing, his expression unchanging.

"Hey," Lucian called, his tone unusually calm. "Since you're already out here, I figured we should talk."

"Sorry," Liam replied coldly, beginning to walk away, "but I don't think you and I have anything to discuss."

Lucian's voice followed him, persistent but steady. "I get it—you probably don't trust me or even like me. You're just tolerating me because of this exam. But that's not what this is about."

Liam didn't bother to look back, continuing his slow, measured steps.

"I just want to know one thing," Lucian added, louder now, his voice almost desperate. "Is there something about you you're not telling the group? Or the academy?"

Liam froze mid-step. The silence that followed was almost deafening. After a long pause, he slowly turned to face Lucian, his crimson eyes narrowing annoyingly.

"What bullshit are you trying to spew right now?"

"Hey, relax," Lucian said, sliding down from the tree branch and brushing off his hands. "What I'm saying is, for someone ranked 8th, the power and skill you've shown out here are on par with the top three—if

not higher. It's hard not to wonder if you're holding back your true strength from the academy or something."

Liam turned fully to face Lucian, his expression unreadable. "Try making sense with your words. You're rambling like someone who doesn't know what they're trying to say. Stop beating around the bush."

Lucian flinched slightly at the bluntness, irritation flashing across his face, but he quickly composed himself. "Alright, fine. What I mean is this: ever since our first run-ins at the academy, back when I used to tail Chris to stir up trouble, you always had this... presence. An aura that didn't match someone ranked 8th. It felt off—like you were much stronger than the academy realized.

"Chris and Logan might not have noticed it, but I did. And out here in Vlardia, you've proven me right. The power and skill you've displayed? It's far beyond your rank..."

"You're misunderstanding everything," Liam interrupted, his tone calm.

"What?" Lucian frowned.

"Let me spell it out for you," Liam said. "But in return, I want to know about those gauntlets you keep forming every time you fight."

Lucian raised an eyebrow, then shrugged. "Fair enough."

"Good. Now listen up," Liam began. "Here's the truth: you're stronger than me. The problem is, you don't see it because you're so focused on the few areas where I outclass you that you ignore the bigger picture."

Lucian blinked, momentarily thrown off. "Stronger than you? That's..."

"Exactly what I said," Liam cut in. "As a fire magic user, I'm bound to be faster and have more destructive power in certain situations. That's just the nature of my element. But raw destructive potential doesn't equal overall strength."

"You're physically stronger than me by a wide margin. Your endurance is better too. But the reason you think I'm stronger? It's not because of power. It's because you don't believe in yourself. You second-guess everything. If we're being honest, you alone could've handled every demon we've faced so far. Hell, even that Titanborne. And deep down, you know I'm right."

Lucian stood there, stunned. He opened his mouth to respond, but Liam raised a hand to cut him off.

"Keep whatever excuses you're about to make to yourself. Now tell me about those gauntlets of yours."

Lucian hesitated before sighing. "Fine." He held up his hands, showing two simple rings on his middle fingers. "See these? They're what form the gauntlets. By infusing my myst into them, the gauntlets materialize around my hands.

"They're not just for show—they help me channel my myst more precisely, boosting both control and output. Without them, my magic's a little harder to manage."

Liam studied the rings, his expression thoughtful. "Interesting. And where'd you get them?"

"Family heirlooms," Lucian replied, smirking faintly. "Passed down for generations. Why? Thinking about stealing them?"

"Not interested," Liam said flatly.

"You sure cause—" Lucian began, but Liam cut him off sharply, his tone carrying an edge that silenced him mid-sentence.

"Shut up," Liam snapped, his eyes darting toward the deeper shadows of the forest.

Lucian frowned, about to retort, but Liam's next words came even colder. "I said, shut it."

The sudden glow in Liam's crimson eyes was enough to freeze Lucian in place, a cold knot forming in his stomach.

'Damn it,' Liam thought, his senses on high alert. 'Of all the times, it had to be now? Fighting those things right after the Titanborne? This is gonna be hell.' His gaze was locked on a point far beyond the trees, where an oppressive aura pulsed faintly but unmistakably.

The presence was sickeningly familiar—an echo of the same monstrous energy he'd felt near the outskirts of Nystra City.

Lucian's confusion shifted to unease as he finally felt it too—a heavy, disgusting energy crawling through the air, far stronger and darker than anything they'd encountered so far.

"What the hell is that?" Lucian asked in a whisper, his voice laced with revulsion.

"Horrors," Liam muttered, his tone flat.

"Horrors?" Lucian's unease spiked. "You mean there's more than one? I only sense one presence..."

"There are three Horrors," Liam clarified, his gaze narrowing as the oppressive energy grew more distinct. "And one Advanced Horror."