

ShadowBound 194

Chapter 194: Door Portal

The following day was calm, the academy unusually quiet since it was still the weekend. Most students were nowhere to be seen, likely still holed up in their dorms, debating over their course selections.

After finishing his morning workout, Liam was ready to seek out Mystica for answers about Tactical Espionage and Diplomacy. However, there was one major problem—he had no idea where to find her.

Sure, he had been to her chamber multiple times, but never of his own free will. Every encounter with Mystica had been unexpected and involuntary, with her simply teleporting him whenever she pleased. Because of that, he had absolutely no clue where her chamber was actually located.

Now, standing in the academy halls, Liam realized just how much of a problem that was.

For the next hour, he wandered the academy, searching aimlessly, scanning every hallway, every corridor, and even the Beacon Hall, hoping to find some clue to Mystica's whereabouts. At this point, he was starting to look almost desperate.

Then, a thought crossed his mind.

Ariana.

She was Mystica's assistant, meaning she had to know exactly where Mystica's chamber was. If anyone could point him in the right direction, it was her.

With that realization, Liam turned on his heel and made his way toward Ariana's dorm.

As he reached his destination, Liam stood outside Ariana's dorm, hands tucked in his pockets, waiting for an answer. The first knock had been met with silence, so after a few seconds, he knocked again.

'Maybe she's not around.'

That thought crossed his mind, but before he could turn away, he heard movement from the other side.

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Inside, Ariana had just stepped out of the bathroom, steam curling off her damp skin. Wrapped in a snug white towel that covered her chest and just barely reached mid-thigh, she was using another towel to dry her dripping auburn hair. She blinked, slightly groggy, wondering why someone was knocking this early.

Then she frowned.

Early?

Her sleepy mind jolted awake as she realized something—she had overslept. Badly.

Snapping her gaze to the window, she saw that the sun was already high in the sky. A startled yelp almost escaped her lips, but before she could fully panic about that, the knock came again.

"Coming!" she called absentmindedly, walking toward the door.

Still towel-clad, still dripping wet, still very much not dressed.

She flung the door open without a second thought, only to be met with Liam's red eyes staring down at her.

Ariana froze.

Liam blinked.

Ariana blinked back.

For a long, silent second, neither moved—until Ariana's brain finally rebooted.

Oh no.

OH NO.

Her towel.

Her glasses—she wasn't wearing them!

Her hair—a dripping mess!

And most importantly—LIAM WAS SEEING HER LIKE THIS!

"—EEP!"

In an instant, Ariana slammed the door shut with enough force to shake the hinges.

From outside, Liam simply raised an eyebrow. "...Was that an invitation or a threat?"

—

Inside her room, Ariana pressed her back against the door, face burning.

'I just answered the door like that?!'

"I'm an idiot. A complete idiot." she whispered, covering her face with her hands. "What is he gonna think? That I just walk around like this all morning?! Is he gonna think I—?!"

Her mind raced with horrifyingly embarrassing possibilities.

"This is bad. This is so bad. What if he thinks I'm into weird stuff?! What if he—"

A knock interrupted her self-inflicted meltdown.

"Ariana?" Liam's voice came from the other side, completely calm and unaffected. "You good?"

"Y-YES! JUST GIVE ME A MINUTE!" she screeched.

Liam, still standing in the hallway, merely shrugged. "Alright."

Oblivious. Absolutely oblivious.

Ariana scrambled to get dressed, throwing on the first set of clothes she could find, muttering to herself the entire time.

Meanwhile, Liam wasn't paying attention when a part of his shadow suddenly crept along the floor, sliding under Ariana's door like a snake.

A few minutes later, the door creaked open, and Ariana stepped out, now properly dressed in a simple yet elegant dress, her glasses resting on the bridge of her nose.

She exhaled softly, still feeling a lingering heat of embarrassment from earlier. But at least now she was presentable.

However, as she fully opened the door, Liam's attention was immediately drawn not to Ariana—but to the tiny creature proudly perched on her shoulder.

Nyxie.

The little Nyxarion smirked—or at least, the closest thing to a smirk a small shadowy beast could manage. Her tail flicked, her dark scales glimmering faintly in the dim light as she crouched on Ariana's shoulder like she owned the place.

Liam's expression darkened.

'When did she leave my shadow?'

He didn't even sense her slipping away. Again.

Before he could think any further, his sharp ears caught the sound of approaching voices and footsteps. Students heading down the hallway.

Instinctively, Liam moved.

Without warning, he stepped forward, placed a hand on Ariana's shoulder, and lightly pushed her back inside her room.

"Huh—?!" Ariana squeaked, stumbling slightly as Liam smoothly followed her in and shut the door behind them.

The voices outside grew louder, passed by, and then gradually faded away down the hallway.

Silence settled in the room.

Ariana, still slightly flustered, adjusted her glasses, staring at Liam. "A little warning next time, maybe?"

Liam ignored her, his eyes locking onto Nyxie, who sat smugly in Ariana's arms now, curling up comfortably.

"Alright, you," Liam began, his tone laced with quiet disapproval. "Since when did you start sneaking out without permission?"

Nyxie immediately tensed, realizing what was coming.

A scolding.

-Nope. Not happening.-

Before Liam could say another word, Nyxie dived headfirst into Ariana's arms, curling into a tight ball like a guilty pet avoiding punishment.

Ariana barely had time to react before a bundle of soft, shadowy warmth burrowed against her chest.

"—Eh?!" she gasped, instinctively holding Nyxie as the little creature clung to her for dear life.

Liam's eye twitched.

The damn lizard knew exactly what she was doing.

"Really?" he muttered, unimpressed.

Nyxie peeked up at him with wide, innocent eyes, her tail flicking.

Ariana, still a little confused, slowly glanced between them. Then, realizing Nyxie was using her as a shield, she couldn't help but giggle softly.

"You're kinda cute when you're trying to get out of trouble," she whispered to Nyxie, stroking her head.

Nyxie purred smugly, satisfied with her escape strategy.

Liam sighed heavily, rubbing his temple before waving it off.

"Whatever," he muttered. "Not the reason I came here anyway."

Remembering why he had sought Ariana out in the first place.

Liam turned his gaze to Ariana as he got straight to the point.

"Sorry to just come hear unannounced but, do you know where Mystica's chamber is?"

Ariana blinked, pushing up her glasses. "Um... not exactly," she admitted. "But..."

Liam raised an eyebrow, waiting.

"I do know how to get there," she continued, a small smile forming.

She then turned and pointed towards a door Liam hadn't noticed before.

His gaze narrowed. It blended so seamlessly into the room's interior that it was almost unnatural.

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Ariana cleared her throat before explaining, "Mystica enchanted this door for me in case I ever needed to ask her something or talk to her. But she also told me not to show it to anyone unless absolutely necessary."

She hesitated slightly before glancing at Liam.

"But... I think she might understand," she finished softly.

Liam stared at the door for a moment, then gave a slow nod.

"Fine."

Ariana stepped forward and placed her hand against the door's surface. The moment she did, a faint ripple of energy pulsed outward, and the entire doorframe glowed with a soft, ethereal light.

A second later, the wood shifted into a shimmering portal, its surface swirling with deep blues and purples like a living galaxy.

Liam exhaled, watching the magical entrance.

"That'll do," he muttered before turning his gaze to Nyxie.

"Alright, you. Back into my shadow," he ordered.

Nyxie, who was still curled up comfortably in Ariana's arms, made no move to obey.

Instead, she gave Liam a flat look, then gestured stubbornly with her tiny claw towards Ariana.

It was clear—she wasn't going anywhere.

Liam's eye twitched.

Ariana, watching the silent standoff, chuckled softly. "She wants to stay with me for a while," she translated with a small smile.

Liam exhaled, already tired. "Yeah, I got that."

Ariana adjusted her glasses. "You don't have to worry. I won't be going anywhere this morning—just studying. So she'll be indoors."

Nyxie nodded enthusiastically, her tail swaying like she had just won a grand battle.

Liam ran a hand through his hair, then sighed in resignation. "Fine."

With that, he turned back towards the portal. "See you later," he said before stepping forward.

The instant he passed through, his form disappeared into the swirling energy, and the portal sealed behind him with a soft hum.

Ariana stared at the closed door for a moment.

Then, with a very soft sigh, she collapsed onto her bed, burying her face into her pillow.

Two days in a row.

Two days in a row she had been caught in some kind of weird, embarrassing situation with Liam.

She groaned quietly, the memory of standing at the door in just a towel flashing in her mind again.

But even as she buried her face deeper, her lips twitched slightly into a small, amused blush.