

ShadowBound 220

Chapter 220: Time With Charlotte

"Liam?" Charlotte's voice softened as she rose from her crouch, her sharp feline eyes fading back to their usual warm brown.

"Sorry for that little ambush—I thought you were Lady Seraphina." She offered a sheepish smile as the last remnants of her hybrid form receded.

Liam loosened his grip on his sword. "Lady Seraphina? Why would she be here?"

"She was teaching me how to move more stealthily in my hybrid form. Told me to practice with the holographic dummies in the dark to improve my instincts." Charlotte rolled her shoulders as if shaking off the tension.

"I see." Liam sheathed his sword. "So I was just an unfortunate target?"

"Well... yeah," Charlotte admitted with a playful smirk. "Sorry if I scared you, bae." She purred the last word, her tone dripping with amusement.

Liam gave no reaction as he turned to leave. "I should be apologizing for interrupting your training."

"No need," Charlotte shrugged, skipping to his side. "You actually saved me—I was getting bored."

Liam didn't respond, but Charlotte wasn't done.

"So... why are you here? Don't tell me you were worried about me?" she teased.

"I came for my recording crystal. I left it in the changing room."

Charlotte's lips curled into a sly smile as she pulled something from her pocket, holding it up between her fingers. The crystal gleamed under the dim light.

"You mean this crystal?"

Liam's gaze locked onto it. "Yeah."

"Looks like you didn't leave it in the changing room after all." She chuckled.

"Must've dropped it on my way out." Liam reached for it, but before his fingers could close around it, Charlotte pulled her hand back.

"Not so fast, pretty boy," she purred, twirling playfully. "You gotta earn it back."

Liam suppressed a sigh. 'This is exactly what I wanted to avoid.'

"What do you want?" he asked, voice flat.

"Now that's a good boy~." She grinned. "Since this is my first request from you, I'll keep it simple. Let's chat."

"...Chat?"

"Yep." Charlotte spun on her heel and started toward the doors of the training hall. "Come on, talking while standing still is boring. I like to stroll."

Liam exhaled quietly but followed without another word.

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The cool night air greeted Liam and Charlotte as they stepped out of the training hall. The academy grounds were quiet, save for a few distant figures making their way back to their dorms. Myst-powered lanterns lined the pathways, casting long shadows that flickered with each step they took.

Charlotte stretched her arms above her head, letting out a satisfied sigh. "Mmm... finally, some fresh air. That training hall was getting suffocating."

Liam said nothing, his gaze fixed on the path ahead. He wasn't in the mood for conversation, but he knew Charlotte well enough—she wasn't going to let him off so easily.

"So," she started, glancing at him with a teasing smirk, "how's training with Mister Doom and Gloom? I saw those bruises before you got them healed. Looks like Kaine's been extra mean to you."

Liam didn't answer right away. "It's nothing."

Charlotte scoffed. "That's all I get? Just 'nothing'? Come on, bae, give me more than that."

He sighed. "What do you want me to say? That he's brutal? That he treats me more like an enemy than a student?"

She grinned. "Now we're getting somewhere." Nudging him with her elbow, she asked, "So, what's his deal with you anyway? Kaine's a nightmare for everyone, but with you, it's like he's got a personal vendetta."

Liam exhaled through his nose. "No idea. Not that it matters."

Charlotte tilted her head, studying him. "Huh. You really don't care, do you?"

"I don't waste time on things that don't affect my goals."

She chuckled. "That's my babe."

Silence settled between them as they walked, until Charlotte suddenly spun around, walking backward with effortless grace. "Alright, next question—what do you think of Lady Seraphina?"

Liam raised an eyebrow. "Why are you asking?"

Charlotte smirked. "Oh, just curious. She flirts with you a lot, you know. Kinda feels like she's got a thing for you. And you don't seem to mind, which makes me highly jealous." She pouted dramatically.

Liam's expression remained blank. "She's our instructor. Do you expect me to be hostile towards her?"

"Damn right. Which part of 'you're mine' is hard to understand?" She huffed, spinning back around, still pouting.

Liam remained silent. 'Does she think we're in a relationship or something?'

Charlotte shot him a sidelong glance. "Aren't you gonna say something?"

"Do I need to?"

She groaned. "You are so frustrating." Then, with a grin, she added, "But somehow, I love you more for it~."

Liam barely held back a sigh. 'She's acting just like Lady Seraphina. How annoying. As if they're mother and daughter.'

They reached a small bridge overlooking one of the academy's decorative ponds. Charlotte leaned against the railing, gazing at the water's surface. "You ever get tired of all this?" she asked after a pause.

Liam stood beside her, eyes drifting to the moon. "What do you mean?"

"This whole academy thing. Training, fighting, dealing with instructors who want to break us down... Sometimes I wonder what it'd be like to just leave."

Liam considered her words. "It's just a three-year academy. I don't see the struggle. And besides, what would you do outside of here?"

Charlotte tapped her chin playfully. "Hmm... probably become a mercenary. Or maybe a pirate. Ooh, maybe even a rogue noble, stealing from the rich and giving to the poor!"

Liam shot her a flat look. "You wouldn't give a single coin away."

She burst into laughter. "Okay, fine, you got me. I'd keep most of it. But I'd make it look good."

Liam shook his head slightly.

Charlotte turned to face him, resting her chin on her hand. "And you? If you weren't here, what would you be doing?"

Liam was silent for a long moment before finally answering, "I don't know."

Charlotte blinked. "Huh. Didn't expect that answer."

"There's no point thinking about things that won't happen."

She sighed dramatically. "Ugh, you're so practical. I was hoping for something a little more exciting."

Liam exhaled. "Are we done?"

Charlotte grinned, twirling the recording crystal between her fingers. "Almost. Just one last thing..."

"What is it?"

She leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a playful whisper. "You owe me a favor now."

Liam stared at her. "...For what?"

"For keeping your crystal safe, of course." She winked and flipped it toward him. "You'll find out what I want later. Goodnight, pretty boy."

Before Liam could respond, she spun on her heel and disappeared into the night.

He looked down at the crystal in his hand, his expression unreadable. 'She's as much of a pain as ever. At least she didn't pull anything extra this time.'