

ShadowBound 223

Chapter 223: He's Changing

Later that day, Liam and his group spent their time sparring, with the exception of Ariana, who stood aside to observe and heal them when necessary. The six rotated opponents every 15 minutes, taking a five-minute break in between rounds.

Instead of using the outdoor training grounds, they opted for one of the academy's enclosed training halls. It provided quick access to drinking water, changing rooms, and most importantly, a controlled environment where they could go all out—at least, within reason.

Of course, within reason didn't apply when Asher was involved.

While Liam sparred with Sheila, Charlotte, Max, and Dylan, the intensity was nothing compared to when he clashed with Asher. Their rivalry burned hot—sometimes literally.

During one of their matches, before the next rotation could even begin, the sheer heat from their flames melted Sheila's ice—despite the fact that she was sparring with Max several feet away. Yet, even as their power flared, both Liam and Asher held back just enough to avoid complete destruction. Their real battles weren't meant for a training hall.

The others had their own moments of dominance. Sheila and Charlotte, ranked 1st and 3rd among the first-years, proved exactly why they held those titles. Charlotte's speed and ferocity made her a nightmare up close, while Sheila's precise, calculated attacks overwhelmed sparring partners before they had a chance to react.

But something was off.

Liam noticed it every time he faced Sheila. Unlike her other fights, where she fought with cold precision, she hesitated against him. Her strikes were restrained, her movements a fraction too slow.

It had been months since their fight—since he had given her that reality check. Yet, despite her overwhelming strength, it seemed she still hadn't fully moved past it.

And Liam, observing every moment of hesitation, couldn't help but wonder—was it fear? Guilt? Or something else entirely?

Liam didn't dwell on it during their sparring session, but he made a mental note. If Sheila was still holding back against him, it could be a problem in real combat. She was the strongest among them—if she hesitated at the wrong moment, it wouldn't just cost them, but herself as well.

After another round of matches, they finally called it a day. Dylan, drenched in sweat, collapsed onto the ground, panting like he had just survived a battlefield.

"I swear... I have never... hated anything more than physical exercise."

Charlotte chuckled as she stretched. "And yet, somehow, you're still breathing. Miraculous."

"Barely," Dylan groaned.

Asher, leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, smirked. "Maybe if you spent more time training instead of whining, you wouldn't be ranked seventh."

Max sighed. "Oh, great, here we go again with the ranks."

Dylan shot up, jabbing a finger at Asher. "Listen here, walking inferno—I may not be in the top five, but I am a man of culture and finesse. You, on the other hand, are just a hotheaded pyromaniac with a god complex."

Asher gave him a slow, amused nod. "So what I'm hearing is... you admit you're weak."

Dylan scowled. "I did not say that."

"You kinda did," Ariana added with a teasing smile.

Dylan threw his hands up. "I hate all of you."

Liam ignored their usual nonsense, his gaze drifting toward Sheila. She sat apart from the others, uncharacteristically quiet, her expression distant.

After a moment, he walked over and sat down beside her. "Let me ask you something." His voice was calm, almost casual. "Are you still caught up in what happened between us?"

Sheila blinked, pulled from her thoughts. "What?"

"I mean back then, when you let your prejudice blind you. You wanted to execute me just because I used dark magic." Liam's tone wasn't accusing—just stating facts. "You've been holding on to something from that time, haven't you?"

Sheila lowered her eyes. "It's not like that," she murmured. "If anything, I appreciate what happened. You made me realize how blind I was... and I changed. That moment helped me grow, and now, I can say I'm truly your friend."

Liam studied her for a second before standing up. "That's good to hear. But honestly, I don't care about the past." His red eyes flickered. "What I do care about is that you're hesitating. And if that hesitation gets in the way during a real fight—if you freeze against a demon—it'll get you killed."

Sheila swallowed hard.

Liam looked down at her, his expression unreadable. "We're friends, right? So don't let the past keep weighing you down."

Sheila stared at him, momentarily stunned.

'When did he start talking like this?'

For as long as she had known Liam, his words had always been cold, blunt, dismissive. But this... this was different. He wasn't just scolding her—he was looking out for her.

'Does he have some kind of dual personality? Or... has he actually changed?'

She found herself smiling softly. "Thanks, Liam. I appreciate it."

"HEY!!!"

Dylan's voice shattered the moment as he stood by the door.

"Lovebirds! Wrap up your little heart-to-heart and let's go!"

He threw up his hands in exaggerated frustration. "For fck's sake! Wasting my precious food time on this disgusting romance!"

Mystica's Chamber

Mystica sprawled across her bed, limbs splayed in utter exhaustion. The relentless investigation into Duchess Aveline's case had drained her both mentally and physically, and the lack of progress gnawed at her patience like an incessant itch.

She groaned, burying her face into the plush pillows before rolling onto her back, staring at the ornate ceiling of her chamber.

"Ugh... just what in the stars did that noblewoman get herself tangled up in?" she muttered, frustration lacing her voice.

This mystery was becoming more than just a challenge—it was getting on her damn nerves.

Mystica let out a long sigh, rubbing her temples as she tried to piece together the tangled mess of this mystery.

"Maybe... there's something I missed," she murmured to herself. "Maybe the transformation isn't just biological or mystical, but something deeper... something extracted—"

She froze mid-thought, the word lingering on her tongue like an ember sparking a wildfire in her mind. Extraction.

Her fingers twitched. Her thoughts raced. And then, as if the universe had just handed her the missing piece, a smirk tugged at her lips.

"Liam."

The name rolled off her tongue like a revelation. He could do it. If there was anyone capable of pulling the truth from this corpse, it was him. His mastery over Extraction—his ability to tear the very essence from a being's remains—was exactly what she needed.

And at this point, she was willing to bet that he was strong enough to handle what she had in mind.