

ShadowBound 224

Chapter 224: Help

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After having dinner with his friends, Liam made his way back to his dorm, his mind weighed down with lingering thoughts. He had played the role of a supportive friend for Sheila, but that didn't mean he wasn't dealing with his own concerns.

With the upcoming exam, a familiar worry gnawed at him—would he need to see Mystica again to have his dark magic sealed?

"I should talk to Mystica about this, but there's no way to reach her right now. I could head to Ariana's room and ask her to use that portal door, but she's probably asleep by now." He mulled over the thought as he approached his dorm.

But the moment he opened his door, his steps faltered.

Instead of his room, he found himself staring into Mystica's chamber.

Liam blinked. He turned slightly to glance over his shoulder—except the hallway he had just walked down was no longer there. Reality had shifted around him.

"Tch, so she wants to talk," he muttered under his breath, already guessing who was behind this. Mystica had either teleported him or bent the very fabric of space.

"Come in, dear Liam~"

Her overly sweet voice rang out as she appeared before him, dressed in a white coat instead of her usual dark gowns. Her hair, normally flowing freely, was tied up in a messy bun.

'Well, that's new.' He noted the change, finding it oddly fitting.

"I actually needed to talk to you about something," Liam began, stepping into the room.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever it is, it can wait, sweetie," Mystica waved him off with a teasing smirk. "I need your help with something real quick."

She turned on her heel, already walking toward a hidden passage. "Follow me. Not to downplay whatever it is you wanted to discuss, but the matter at hand might just be far more important."

Liam narrowed his eyes slightly. 'Matter at hand?' He sighed internally. 'I'm really not in the mood to exhaust myself after those sparring matches, but... I owe Mystica in more ways than one. I guess I should hear her out.'

Without further hesitation, he followed her through the secret door, revealing a descending staircase.

"Well, shall we?" Mystica said with a playful smile.

With a resigned sigh, Liam stepped forward, descending the stairs into whatever madness she was about to throw him into.

As they stepped into Mystica's lab, Liam took a moment to absorb his surroundings. The space was cluttered with alchemical tools, arcane diagrams, and an assortment of strange vials, each pulsing with a faint glow. However, none of it held his attention for long.

The real shock came when Mystica led him deeper into the chamber—where Duchess Aveline's corpse lay on a sleek metallic examination platform.

Liam's red eyes narrowed as he took in the grotesque sight. He had never encountered a Gaia Demon before, but he knew they were Sync-class demons—comparable to the Blood Demons he had fought in the past. Yet what lay before him was something else entirely. A twisted fusion of human and demon. An abomination caught between two states.

As they approached, Mystica began her explanation, detailing everything she had done—every alchemical experiment, every mystic dissection—only to be met with failure at every turn. Liam listened, absorbing the information despite his lack of knowledge and interest in alchemy or the intricacies of mystical biology. Still, he could tell just how deeply this was frustrating Mystica.

"So," he finally said, eyes still locked on the corpse, "what exactly do you need from me? Shouldn't you be asking Ariana? She is your apprentice, after all."

Mystica smiled, resting a hand on the edge of the platform. "Normally, you'd be right, sweetie. But you are the perfect person for this job. And I think you already know why."

Liam frowned, pondering her words for a moment before the realization clicked.

"It's not gonna work," he said flatly.

Mystica's smirk wavered. "What? What makes you think that? You haven't even given it a shot!"

"I know because I've tried it before," Liam replied.

Mystica's brows lifted in intrigue. "Oh? And when exactly did that happen?"

"About a year ago. Back when I was living with the Silverharts." Liam crossed his arms, his gaze darkening slightly as he recalled the memory. "I found a way to increase my endurance, but I needed a catalyst. That led me to the outskirts of Nystra City, where I ran into a Horror-class demon."

Mystica leaned in slightly. "And?"

"I barely won. And when I tried to extract its shadow, I failed."

Mystica's eyes gleamed with curiosity. "Fascinating... and why do you think that was?"

"At first, I thought it was because I was exhausted—low on myst, too drained to perform a proper Extraction," Liam admitted. "But then I dismissed that theory after I extracted Nyxie's shadow just fine."

Mystica hummed, her fingers tapping thoughtfully against the metal table. "Interesting... That means there's something unique about demons—something that resists your ability."

"Exactly," Liam said, his gaze shifting back to the half-transformed body before him. "Which is why I don't think it'll work here either."

"What if that wasn't the reason why? What if it had nothing to do with the nature of demons and everything to do with how strong you were back then?" Mystica mused, tilting her head slightly. "Because looking at you now, you've definitely grown mystically... but not enough to have broken through to the next level."

Liam narrowed his eyes. "Next level? Wait—before we even get to that, I doubt strength has anything to do with this. Nyxie was far stronger than the Horror I fought, yet I still managed to extract her shadow. And back then, I wasn't anywhere near Nyxie's level."

"Exactly," Mystica nodded. "But you were able to extract her because she's already tied to darkness. Demons, on the other hand, are different—especially the ones below the Sync-class."

She stepped away from the corpse, her coat flowing behind her. "Tell me, Liam—what's your current mystical level?"

Liam blinked. "...I don't know?"

Mystica came to a dead stop. "Huh? Please tell me you're joking, sweetie."

"I'm not."

She groaned, dragging a hand down her face. "Gosh, I should've expected this. You never had a proper foundation in magic, so of course, you wouldn't know about levels either." With an exaggerated sigh, she let herself collapse into a nearby chair, throwing one leg over the other.

"Alright, before I explain, tell me this—have you ever experienced something like moving from a weaker state of your body to a greater state?"

Liam hesitated for a moment, then exhaled. "...Yes. When I mastered a higher stage of Crimson Breathing—Overdrive." He never wanted to mention Overdrive to anyone but with how things are going, he had no choice.

Mystica's gaze sharpened at the word. "I see. That—that is what we call Ascension."

She leaned forward slightly, resting her chin on her hand. "Ascension is the process of evolving the Myst Core to a higher level, unlocking greater power, control, and myst capacity. It can happen naturally through training or be forced under extreme conditions. It might sound like core expansion, but it's something entirely different."

"Ascension?" Liam echoed, brows furrowing.

"Yep." Mystica let out a dramatic sigh. "And honestly, it's so annoying that I have to explain this to you now, but oh well. At least you've got a mind that picks things up quickly, so kindly listen carefully—I'm absolutely exhausted."

She straightened up slightly, her fingers tapping against the desk. "First off, in this lovely world of ours, we have something called Mystical Levels. They range from 1-star to 9-star, with each level divided into three stages: Low, Mid, and High. To move from one level to another, you must experience an Ascension."

"There are four ways Ascension can happen, but since I don't have all night, I'll only cover two." She held up a single finger. "First—Natural Ascension. A slow but stable progression of Myst mastery achieved through rigorous training, meditation, and refining one's Myst Core. It's usually triggered by long-term practice or exposure to Myst-rich environments."

Then she lifted a second finger. "And then, we have Forced Ascension. A high-risk, high-reward method where one advances through sheer willpower, extreme pressure, or external forces pushing the Myst Core beyond its limits. This can be triggered by life-or-death situations, consuming rare catalysts, or external interference."

She eyed Liam, a smirk creeping onto her lips. "And judging by what you said earlier, you forced an Ascension when you were mastering that Crimson Overkill technique or whatever it's called."

Liam's eyes narrowed slightly.

Mystica continued. "That might explain why you haven't experienced another Ascension yet. A major drawback of Forced Ascension is that your body takes time to fully adapt to the sudden changes. And just so you know, the reason you keep seeing progress in everything—whether it's learning new disciplines or refining your skills—is because you're still discovering what your Myst Core and body are capable of handling. But soon...

"You'll stop improving. Unless you go through another Ascension."