

ShadowBound 56

Chapter 56: Hope You Are Ready

The rest of the lesson breezed by, and soon the class was dismissed to meet their training instructors.

As the students shuffled out of the classroom, Dylan strode along beside Liam and Asher, his usual mischievous grin plastered across his face. "Man, I'm so jealous of you guys," he groaned dramatically. "Getting healed by her must feel amazing, huh?"

His voice dripped with mock envy, and he placed a hand on his chin as if deep in thought. "Guess I'll just have to get injured myself if I want that kind of... special treatment." He looked off into the distance, eyes full of ridiculous longing.

Asher rolled his eyes. "Luckily for your dumb ass, she's stuck as your instructor for a long time, seeing as you're the only weirdo with that steel magic of yours."

"Mind your tongue, you irrational hellhound," Dylan shot back, grinning ear to ear. "Steel magic is one of a kind." He puffed out his chest with exaggerated pride.

"Yeah, 'one of a kind' alright. I've never seen anything that weird before—and honestly, I hope I never do again." Asher's smug smirk grew, knowing his jab had landed perfectly.

The two continued their back-and-forth, slinging playful insults at each other. Liam trailed behind them, his hands in his pockets, lost in thought.

His mind drifted to Mystica's lesson.

'That thing I fought at the outskirts of Nystra...' he mused. 'It must've been an advanced Horror. But how did I know how to defeat it? I'm sure all that happened because my instincts took over.'

He clenched his fists slightly in his pockets, frustration flickering across his face.

'But what was an advanced Horror doing out there, so far from where it should be?' His brows furrowed. 'Asking myself won't get me anywhere. I need to focus on training with Galen.'

His thoughts were interrupted by a voice that pulled him back to reality.

"Hey, Dylan! Hurry up! Today's your first day of training, and you're already about to be late?"

Liam's gaze shifted to the source of the voice. It was Ariana, Mystica's assistant, standing a short distance ahead with her hands on her hips, an exasperated expression on her face.

Dylan perked up instantly, turning toward her with a wide grin. "Ah, my bad, Ariana!" he called out, momentarily abandoning his verbal sparring with Asher.

With a quick glance at his companions, Dylan leaned in toward them and whispered conspiratorially, "You unlucky bastards. Unlike you two, I get to train with a goddess—blessed with curves straight out of my dreams and an instructor who's basically perfect."

He winked before sprinting off toward Ariana, leaving Asher groaning in disbelief.

"That guy is beyond hopeless," Asher muttered, shaking his head.

As Dylan caught up with Ariana, she gave him a side glance. "You know, Mystica's going to kill you if you ate to start like this," she warned with a playful smirk.

"Totally worth it," Dylan said with a shrug, hands behind his head.

Ariana shot him a knowing look. "You just can't help running your mouth, can you? I bet you already told those two everything about training with me."

"Of course not," Dylan said, though the grin on his face told a different story.

As they started walking, Ariana glanced back, her eyes locking momentarily with Liam's. For a brief second, her playful demeanor faltered, replaced by a flicker of concern.

'His eyes... they're so empty.'

She shook off the strange thought as she and Dylan disappeared down the corridor.

Now left alone, Liam and Asher stood in awkward silence.

"Guess we should get going too," Asher grumbled. "Not that Galen's going to be on time anyway."

Liam said nothing, his mind elsewhere.

"Hey!" Asher barked. "When I talk to you, answer me, dammit!"

Liam blinked slowly, then gave Asher a flat look. "You didn't say anything worth replying to." With that, he turned and began walking away.

"Don't you walk off on me!" Asher snapped, hurrying to catch up. He stormed ahead of Liam, making a point to walk slightly in front of him. "And for the record—you don't get to walk ahead of me."

Liam just kept walking, unbothered.

Asher shot him an annoyed glare but couldn't help the faint smirk creeping onto his lips. It seemed like whatever kind of relationship they were building... it was going to take a long, messy road to get there.

Liam and Asher returned to their rooms to change into their training clothes before heading to the designated training grounds.

As they arrived, Asher let out a scoff. "What did I say? Galen wasn't gonna be here early."

Just as the words left his mouth, a voice echoed from the audience seats. "For someone who's late, you still have a big mouth," Galen remarked, his tone dripping with disdain. He was lounging with his legs crossed, chin resting on his hand, watching them with a bored gaze.

Asher blinked, clearly taken aback, while Liam's expression remained indifferent.

Galen rose from his seat, stepping down the stairs with slow, deliberate strides. "I suppose the little feat of destroying boulders must've inflated your egos," he mused.

Reaching them, he let his gaze flick over the two boys. "Anyway, I've decided to skip the boulder exercises for now. Instead, we'll focus on something that most kids like you are terrible at."

"And what exactly is that supposed to—" Asher began, but Galen shot him a glare, cutting him off.

"Shut up when I'm talking, you worthless peasant," he snapped.

Asher clenched his jaw but said nothing, his eyes burning with a mixture of frustration and respect.

Galen continued, his tone dripping with mock patience. "Now, can either of you guess what today's lesson is about?"

Asher opened his mouth, but one look from Galen silenced him. Liam remained silent, observing.

Galen sighed, feigning disappointment. "Typical. Despite being worthless, one might hope you'd at least have some brains."

He took a deep breath, his demeanor shifting as he began the lesson. "Today, we're focusing on how most fire wielders—like you two—fight. And, historically, fire wielders stick to close-range combat."

"Well, yeah," Asher cut in. "That's what our ability's designed for."

"Wrong," Galen corrected, his voice sharp. "The ability doesn't limit the user; the user limits the ability. Elemental abilities like Earth and Water are often thought of as long-range powers, while fire manipulators are expected to charge into close combat. But that's only because people are too simple-minded to consider alternatives."

He paced in front of them, eyes narrowing. "Demons are evolving, adapting to the patterns they've observed from centuries of battles with knights and wielders like us. It's about time we change our tactics."

"So... you're saying we should start learning long-range attacks too?" Liam asked.

"Exactly," Galen replied, nodding. "It's time to adapt to every form of combat. You can't be predictable anymore."

"But... is that even possible?" Asher asked, skepticism flashing in his eyes.

Galen gave a small smirk. "What you mean is, 'How is it possible?' And that's exactly what we're here to find out."

He stopped in front of them, crossing his arms. "Let me give you a prime example. Do either of you know who the top-ranked student among the third years—and the entire academy—is right now?"

The boys exchanged uncertain glances but remained silent.

Galen rolled his eyes. "Figures. Percy Granger, prince of the Ice Kingdom. And before you go assuming he's just a glorified version of his sister Sheila, listen closely."

He leaned in slightly, his gaze steely. "Sheila's talented, sure—number one among the first years, with her rare combination of light magic and dual elements, Ice and Water. But Percy? He's only an ice

manipulator. No fancy dual elements, no legendary bloodline boost. Everything he's achieved, he's earned through skill and grit."

Galen's voice grew intense. "He realized early on that being a long-range fighter—a natural tendency for most ice manipulators—would only take him so far. He learned, mastered, and evolved his ability, adapting it to cover every range. His ice manipulation is now so versatile and deadly that even high-ranked knights struggle to keep up."

"So," he continued, letting the weight of his words sink in, "if you think learning or adapting to new skills to strengthen your abilities is 'impossible,' then you're as good as dead. Drop those pointless limitations, or be prepared to fail."

He fixed them both with a hard stare, waiting for the challenge to sink in.

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Liam cut in, his voice low but clear, a calm defiance in his tone.

"I didn't come here to hear you ramble on about some third-year I don't know or care about. My focus is on my own achievements, not theirs. And spare us the theatrics—'dismiss yourselves,' 'drop dead,' 'worthless peasant'—we both know leaving to train with the 'less privileged' students isn't an option for us."

Liam's gaze locked with Galen's, steady and unyielding. "So how about you get to the point and start this lesson?"

For a moment, Galen studied Liam with a blank expression. Then, slowly, he smirked.

"Alright, if you're so eager, let's get right to it. Today, you'll spar against each other. But since you're both reckless close-range fighters, this is gonna be perfect. Stay twenty meters apart. No closing the gap. You'll need to attack and avoid each other from a distance."

Liam and Asher exchanged glances, the challenge sparking in their eyes.

"Oh, this is perfect," Asher said, rolling his shoulders with a grin. "Finally, I get to wipe the floor with you, Number Eight."

Liam's gaze remained stoic, but a faint, competitive spark lit his eyes. "We'll see if you can manage that, buzz cut."

They moved apart, spacing themselves the required twenty meters, each sizing the other up.

"Let's see what you've got, then," Galen called, making his way to the audience seats. He sat back, crossing his arms. "And don't hold back—I want to see what you're really capable of when you can't rely on your usual tactics."