

ShadowBound 57

Chapter 57: Long Range Sparring Match

'I'm at a disadvantage here,' Liam thought, studying Asher from the twenty meters between them. 'His flames are wilder and burn hotter than mine. He knows that, too.'

The air between them was thick with tension as they prepared to start, but Galen's voice interrupted.

"Before you begin, there's one more rule," Galen said, leaning forward in his seat. "Though this is primarily a long-range match, you can engage in close combat if you choose. But when you do, each of you is allowed only two attacks before you're required to return to long range."

Asher and Liam shared a look, processing the added complexity.

"To clarify," Galen continued, "if one of you initiates close-range combat and fails to overpower the other within those two attacks, then your opponent can counter with a single close-range attack, even if they didn't initiate it. And remember—you don't have to wait for the other to fail before using your own remaining attack in close range."

Liam's expression remained stoic as he confirmed, "So if I go in close, attack twice, and fail, then later Asher goes in close, attacks twice, and also fails—at that moment, I'd still have one last close-range attack available?"

"Exactly," Galen replied with a nod. "But use it wisely. The point is to strategize—not to rush in blindly."

"Enough talking!" Asher grinned, rolling his shoulders as he prepared himself. "Let's get this going already!"

The rules were clear, and both boys tensed, their flames simmering just under the surface, ready to be unleashed.

As they began, both boys held their ground, assessing each other. Asher's blue flames flickered to life around his hands, casting a faint glow across the training ground.

His grin was as wild as his flames, his eyes locked on Liam with a fierce intensity.

"What's wrong, Liam? Scared to get burned?" Asher taunted, throwing a quick burst of flames Liam's way to test his reactions.

Liam sidestepped smoothly, his own flames flaring briefly in response, though more controlled. 'Asher's trying to bait me. He knows I prefer getting in close,' he thought, keeping his breathing steady.

Asher fired another blast, this time arching the flames in a sweeping line to cut off Liam's escape route. "C'mon, you're not just gonna stand there, are you?" he shouted, eyes flashing with anticipation.

'If I move too fast, he'll just keep pushing me back with these flames,' Liam calculated, searching for an opening.

He decided to try a different approach, aiming a sharp burst of his own fire toward Asher's feet to throw him off balance.

Asher saw it coming and leaped to the side, countering with a wave of flame that spiraled toward Liam. 'He's not bad at this range,' Asher admitted to himself, a little surprised. 'But I bet he's already itching to break into close combat.'

Liam dodged again, barely avoiding the heat. 'He's getting impatient,' he noted, recognizing the slight twitch in Asher's stance. 'If I keep pushing him, he'll get reckless.'

They exchanged a few more controlled bursts of flame, each of them dancing around the field, testing each other.

Liam remained calm, his moves calculated, while Asher grew more animated, throwing quick jabs of flame with an almost playful aggression.

"What's the matter, Liam?" Asher called out with a smirk, his voice dripping with mock concern. "Already worn out from dodging?"

Liam smirked back, his gaze steady. "You wish. Just watching you get tired from wasting all that energy."

Asher's grin faltered for a split second, his flames flaring in response to the jab. 'I'll show him who's wasting energy,' he thought, bracing himself for the next move.

And just like that, Asher began his relentless assault on Liam—and Liam could feel it.

Liam could feel the sting of Asher's flames pressing in, his own fire paling against the wild blue heat Asher wielded.

Deciding it was time to change tactics, Liam surged forward, closing the distance with a remarkable speed. He launched his first close-combat attack, aiming a sharp kick toward Asher's side.

Asher was to block the attack with a quick sweep of his arm, grinning.

"Oh, going for close-combat already?" Asher sneered, sidestepping Liam's second strike—a fierce uppercut accompanied with flames.

Liam quickly drew back after fail to succeed, panting slightly.

Asher gave a small smirk as he watched Liam draw back. "Is that it?" He asked and without hesitation, he dashed toward Liam, who hadn't even landed well to take a proper stance yet.

'He's got nowhere to go now. He hasn't even taken a proper stance... he is definitely done for' Asher thought as he surged forward with confidence. 'This fight is mine'

He launched his first punch toward Liam's exposed side, but Liam twisted smoothly, narrowly avoiding the hit. Asher seemed frustrated but he was undeterred.

He followed up with a powerful flame—charged hook, aiming directly for Liam's face. This time he knew he had won and the fight was over since he had placed in a situation where he can't use his dominant hand—the right hand.

Well, that's what Asher thought.

The blow didn't connect. In one fluid motion, Liam sidestepped, his left hand already clenched and waiting. At this moment Asher knew, he had messed up, but it was too late as he saw a glint of Liam's knuckles.

With a solid thud, Liam's left fist, blazing with crimson flames, drove hard into Asher's gut. The force rippled through Asher's core, the fire searing and intense, but it was the sheer impact that sent him reeling.

Asher's breath vanished from his lungs as he flew back, the world around him blurring as he hit the ground, sliding back several feet.

His vision pulsed, darkening, as a heavy dizziness overtook him.

'What... just... happened...?' he thought hazily, fighting to stay conscious. The last thing he saw was Liam, standing there unfazed.

Liam watched as Asher passed out, he was the victor but he didn't really care about that.

"Well done," Galen called out, his voice echoing from the audience seat. He looked at Liam with a hint of approval in his gaze. "It seems you know how to use your natural gift quite well in battle."

Liam met his eyes with a calm, unchanging expression. "So, you knew I was ambidextrous?"

Galen gave a faint smirk. "Of course. During the entrance trials, you used dual daggers. Only a handful of fighters can handle dual weapons that seamlessly." He leaned forward, his gaze sharp.

"Plenty wield two weapons, but the subtle difference in how they handle the right and left is always there. An ambidextrous fighter like you, though? There's no imbalance. Everything's perfectly fluid."

Liam's eyes narrowed slightly as he processed this. 'I didn't fully realize the advantages myself... Draven was the one who figured it out,' he thought, feeling a faint flicker of gratitude toward his mentor.

"What should I do with Asher?" he asked, gesturing to his sparring partner, still sprawled out on the ground, barely stirring.

"Take him to the healers. They'll know how to treat him if he has any injuries," Galen replied, standing to leave. "You're both done for the day."

Without looking back, Galen waved dismissively. "Tomorrow, we pick up where we left off."

Liam watched as Galen strode away, then glanced down at Asher. With a small sigh, he crouched beside him and hoisted him up, draping one of Asher's arms over his shoulder.

"You owe me for this one, buzz cut," Liam muttered with a dry humor as he made his way toward the healer's quarters.