

ShadowBound 75

Chapter 75: The Voice

The infirmary was quiet, save for the soft flicker of enchanted lanterns casting a warm glow across the room.

Asher and Liam lay unconscious on their respective beds, their bodies showing the wear and tear from their intense sparring with Galen.

Dylan leaned casually against the wall, arms crossed, while Ariana sat nearby, her legs elegantly crossed, glancing between the two boys.

The sun had long disappeared below the horizon, and the night air outside brought a calm chill to the quarters.

"They really got wrecked by those last two kicks from Galen," Dylan remarked with a mischievous smirk, his eyes glinting in the light. "It's almost impressive, in a way."

Ariana chuckled softly, brushing a strand of auburn hair from her face. "Yeah, I'm honestly surprised it's just a few broken ribs. Knowing Galen, I expected worse."

Dylan tilted his head, mockingly contemplative. "They deserved it... hehe, for thinking they had a chance against."

Ariana rolled her eyes. "Still, how long are they planning to stay out? It's been hours..." Her voice trailed off as a sudden rustling came from Asher's bed.

With a sharp gasp, Asher's eyes snapped open, and he shot upright as though jolted by lightning.

He winced slightly but showed no signs of staying down. His eyes darted around the room before locking onto Dylan and Ariana.

"What are you two doing here?" he snapped, his voice cutting through the quiet.

Dylan raised an eyebrow, smirking lazily. "Relax, Tiger. We're only here because your oh-so-mighty body couldn't handle Galen's minimum strength."

He emphasized the last two words with a grin that was equal parts mocking and playful.

Asher's eye twitched, his hand gripping the edge of the bed as he inhaled sharply. He knew Dylan wasn't wrong, and that made it worse. With a frustrated sigh, he let it slide—for now.

"Anyway," Asher said, his voice laced with irritation, "where's that wannabe idiot?"

Ariana pointed calmly. "He's still out. Over there."

Asher followed her gaze, his lips curling into a triumphant smirk. "Hah. Looks like I beat him twice today. First in the match, and now in waking up."

He leaned back, clearly savoring the moment. "He couldn't manage to touch Galen, and couldn't even wake up before me."

Dylan shook his head, his blond hair falling into his face as he chuckled. "Your competitiveness will never die, will it?"

"Why should it?" Asher replied, flashing a confident grin. "It's what makes me better."

Ariana sighed, leaning back in her chair. "You two are impossible." But even she couldn't hide the slight smile tugging at her lips.

Asher, now fully awake and animated, folded his arms. "Don't worry. When he wakes up, I'll remind him why I'm still a rank above him."

While the trio continued their conversation in the infirmary, Liam lay still and unresponsive, his consciousness adrift in a void of utter darkness.

The air felt heavy and suffocating, as if the very essence of the place sought to smother him. He could see nothing—not even his own body.

Where am I? he thought, his voice echoing in the vast emptiness. He turned his head instinctively, though no light or form guided his movements.

A voice broke the oppressive silence, deep and dripping with disdain. "I never imagined my power would end up in the hands of such a pitiful child."

Liam's heart pounded as he spun in place, trying to locate the source of the voice. "Who's there?" he demanded, his voice trembling yet steady enough to challenge the unseen presence.

The voice chuckled darkly, its tone mocking. "How pathetic of the gods to allow Jamak to let this happen."

Liam's breath hitched. Jamak? The name struck him like a bolt, igniting confusion and unease. "Who are you?" he called out, his tone sharper this time, a hint of defiance creeping in.

"Who am I?" The voice echoed back, slow and deliberate, laced with condescension. The sound reverberated, filling the void like the whisper of a storm. Then came a low, sinister laugh.

"I am the true owner of the power you so pitifully wield. The rightful master of what slumbers within you... weakling." The final word landed with venom, each syllable dripping with contempt.

Liam's mind raced. 'True owner? Slumbering power? Is he talking about... Aetherion?' A cold chill crept down his spine as the pieces clicked together.

"What do you mean, 'true owner'?" Liam asked, forcing calm into his voice despite the unease churning in his gut.

The voice chuckled again, a sound both amused and derisive. "What I mean, boy, is the power which — the mystic force you've barely scratched the surface of—isn't yours. It's mine. You're nothing more than an unworthy vessel, a pale imitation of what I once was."

Liam scoffed, his irritation flaring. "Tch. Don't make me laugh. Who said I ever wanted anything to do with Aetherion?"

He straightened himself, defiance lacing his words. "Jamak gave it to me, not the other way around. I didn't ask for it, but now that I have it, it's mine. End of story."

The voice let out another low, mocking laugh, its derision palpable. "For someone who couldn't even win a fight, you've got quite the mouth," it sneered. "You know very well Jamak was desperate to die. That's the only reason you crawled out of that forest alive."

Liam clenched his jaw but kept his composure. The voice wasn't telling him anything he didn't already know.

He had never deluded himself into believing he'd genuinely defeated Jamak. But hearing it spoken so plainly still stung.

"So why am I here?" Liam asked, his voice calm but edged with impatience. He scanned the darkness again, still unable to locate the source of the voice.

"Why, indeed," the voice mused, its tone almost playful now. "I had considered taking back my power. But since Kyrell is gone, the gods can't create another vessel for my essence. It seems I'm stuck with you for now."

Liam narrowed his eyes, his irritation bubbling beneath the surface.

"Make no mistake," the voice continued, its coldness returning. "Leaving my power in the hands of a pathetic human like you isn't my preference. I'm sick and tired of watching my strength passed down to fragile mortals who squander it."

The void seemed to pulse with an oppressive energy, making Liam feel as though the air around him was alive and pressing against him.

"But I'll let you be... for now," the voice said, its tone sharp and commanding. "Return to your world. I'll summon you again once you've awakened my power for the first time. When that happens, I'll tell you everything you need to know."

The voice grew colder, a chilling finality in its words. "Until then, prove to me that you're more than just another failure. Show me why you deserve this power... or why I should end your existence myself."

Before Liam could respond, the void around him shifted. The oppressive darkness receded like a wave pulling back into the sea, and a blinding light engulfed him. In the next instant, he felt himself falling—back to the infirmary, back to his world.