

ShadowBound 88

Chapter 88: Little Inquiry

Liam and Dylan strolled leisurely across the academy grounds, the silver moonlight reflecting off the cobblestone paths. The evening was quiet, save for the chirping of crickets and the occasional rustle of leaves in the breeze.

As they moved, Dylan's eyes caught sight of a figure up ahead, trudging toward the dorms. It was Asher, and he looked like he was dragging himself through sheer willpower alone. His legs barely lifted off the ground, and his posture screamed exhaustion.

"Hey, Asher! Wait up!" Dylan called, quickening his pace with a burst of energy. He glanced back at Liam, who continued at his usual unhurried stride. "C'mon, Liam, pick up the pace! We're not in a funeral procession!"

Liam didn't even dignify the comment with a reply.

Dylan jogged up to Asher, tapping him on the shoulder. Asher turned slowly, and when his face came into view, Dylan recoiled so dramatically it looked like he'd just seen a ghost.

"Holy myst, you look like someone tossed you into a volcano and forgot to pull you out!" Dylan exclaimed, his face twisted in exaggerated disgust.

Asher's appearance did little to dispute the claim. His face was smudged with soot, darkened in uneven patches like he'd been through a series of unfortunate explosions. His normally slick hair now stood wildly in all directions, spiked up like he'd been electrocuted.

"Shut up, you idiot," Asher growled, his voice dripping with irritation. "I've had a long day."

"For someone who looks like they just lost a fight with a dragon, you sound surprisingly intact," Dylan teased, leaning in closer as if inspecting him. "Wait—" Dylan sniffed the air and stepped back. "Is that... singed eyebrows I smell?"

Asher's glare could've melted steel. "Go shove your nose somewhere else, bird brain."

"Bird brain?" Dylan gasped, clutching his chest as if wounded. "Well, at least this bird doesn't look like roasted chicken!"

By this time, Liam had finally caught up to them, his expression calm and unbothered as usual. He stopped a few steps away, giving Asher a long, stoic glance.

"You look awful," Liam said bluntly.

The sheer neutrality in Liam's voice, combined with his unreadable expression, seemed to hit harder than Dylan's theatrics.

Asher let out a groan, running a hand through his fried hair. "Great. Just what I needed—mister stoic perfection making me feel even worse."

"I mean," Dylan chimed in with a smirk, "he's not wrong. You do look like you just crawled out of a cursed barbecue pit."

"Keep talking, and I'll drag you into my training session tomorrow," Asher threatened weakly.

"Oh no, I'm terrified," Dylan replied, feigning fear. "What are you gonna do, roast me with your discount blue flames?"

"Say that again and you're dead."

"I think that should be enough," Liam interjected, pinching the bridge of his nose as if dealing with children. "Let's get back before someone collapses—or murders someone else."

As they resumed walking, Dylan leaned closer to Liam and whispered, "Y'know, if Asher's hair stays like that, we might have to start calling him Sparky."

"I heard that!" Asher shouted, his voice echoing through the quiet night.

Dylan burst out laughing, his laughter carrying over the sound of Asher's grumbled curses. Even Liam's lips twitched, almost forming a smile, though he quickly masked it as they continued toward the dorms under the moonlit sky.

Mystica's chamber was a testament to elegance and mystique, a perfect reflection of its occupant. The room was dimly lit by flickering candles, their soft golden glow dancing off the midnight-purple walls adorned with intricate silver patterns resembling constellations.

The scent of lavender and jasmine hung faintly in the air. At the center of the chamber was an opulent bathtub carved from obsidian, its edges lined with delicate etchings of crescent moons and stars. Steam rose gently from the warm water, carrying the faint scent of rose petals that floated lazily on the surface.

Mystica reclined in the bath, her long, dark hair cascading over the side, dampened by the steam. Soap bubbles clung delicately to her form, covering just enough to leave an air of modesty while still exuding an almost ethereal allure.

Her knees poked above the water as she rested one arm casually on the tub's edge, a glass of wine held elegantly in her hand. She closed her eyes, savoring the rare moment of tranquility.

"You know," she said suddenly, her voice lilting and smooth, "it's quite rude to enter a lady's sanctuary without so much as a knock." She took a slow sip of her wine, not bothering to open her eyes.

From the shadows near the back of the room, a figure emerged. Galen, ever unbothered, stepped into the candlelight.

He wore his usual white shirt, sleeves neatly rolled to his forearms, his crimson eyes calm but sharp as ever. He moved with an air of casual confidence, his hands tucked in his pockets.

"Guess I'll have to brush up on my manners," he said dryly, striding to the window on the far side of the room. He gazed out, his reflection faintly visible in the glass against the backdrop of the starry sky.

Mystica finally opened one eye to glance at him, a teasing smirk curling on her lips. "Yes, you should. As you can see, I'm taking a bath." She gestured lazily to the bubbles, as though daring him to react.

"Does it matter? It's not like my presence bothers you," Galen replied, his tone flat as he continued staring out the window.

Mystica chuckled softly. "True. I suppose you're the only man with enough nerve to walk in here like it's your living room." She swirled the wine in her glass, her voice taking on a mischievous edge.

"So? What brings you to your favorite person at such an ungodly hour? Surely, you didn't come to finally discipline me for my many, many sins?"

Galen exhaled through his nose, his lips twitching ever so slightly as if suppressing irritation. "You spend far too much time dreaming up these ridiculous scenarios."

"Well, someone has to liven up the monotony. Isn't that right?" Mystica quipped, finishing her wine and setting the glass down on the edge of the tub. "Anyway, why are you here? Surely not to admire my décor."

"I need you to keep an eye on Kaelen," Galen said, turning his gaze back to her. "He's been making... questionable moves lately. If he tries anything stupid, I want you to be ready. Also, I need intel on Magnus's recent mission in the Tempest Kingdom."

Mystica raised a perfectly arched brow as she stepped out of the tub, water cascading off her form. She reached for a nearby silk robe, slipping it on with a graceful motion. "Intel on Magnus?" she repeated, tying the sash of her robe. "Why not ask him yourself? He's quite... forthcoming, isn't he?"

Galen turned, his expression deadpan. "You and I both know Magnus's memory is about as reliable as a drunken bard. If I ask him, I'll get a half-hearted story about how he 'heroically saved the day'—followed by some nonsensical tangent about pastries."

Mystica laughed, a soft, melodic sound as she moved to a plush armchair by the side of the room. She sat down, adjusting her damp hair over one shoulder. "Fair point. Alright, I'll look into it. As for Kaelen, I've already told him I'm against his plans. He's reckless, but I don't think he'll cross me."

Galen nodded, satisfied. "Good. That's all I needed to hear." He turned, heading toward the door, his hands still tucked in his pockets.

"Wait, Galen," Mystica called, her tone softer now.

He paused, glancing back over his shoulder. His crimson eyes gleamed under the candlelight, his expression unreadable. "What?"

"This might be out of line," she began, her gaze steady, "but why are you so invested in this kid? Liam, I mean. It's not like you to go out of your way for someone."

Galen looked at her for a moment, his face as calm as ever. "No special reason," he said finally. "Just keeping my word to a friend."

Without waiting for a response, he opened the door and walked out, the soft creak of the hinges the only sound in the quiet chamber.

Mystica leaned back in her chair, her fingers tracing idle patterns on the armrest. She gazed at the ceiling, her lips curving into a small smile.

"Keeping your word to a friend, huh?" she murmured. "Still as enigmatic as ever, Galen." She closed her eyes, letting the warmth of the room and the faint scent of lavender lull her back into a rare moment of peace.