

ShadowBound 90

Chapter 90: Late Night Self Mission

Few Minutes Earlier

Ariana trudged down the hallway, her shoulders slumped from the weight of spending the rest of her day in the library.

"This is the price you pay for wanting to become a mage," she muttered to herself, her voice dripping with exhaustion as she shuffled toward her room.

As she neared the entrance to Building B1, something caught her eye—a figure walking away from the building, their silhouette barely visible in the dim light.

"Huh?" Ariana blinked, squinting at the mysterious figure. "Who could be walking around the academy at this hour?" She tilted her head, frowning.

Then, her eyes widened in realization. "Oh no. Could it be... a villain?! Someone plotting evil in the dead of night?" she gasped dramatically, clutching her hands to her chest.

Her heart raced. What if they're planning something terrible right now?

Without thinking, she turned on her heel to head toward the healer's quarters. "I should inform the higher-ups! They'll know what to do!"

But before she took another step, her brain caught up with her feet. "Wait, it's late. Everyone's probably asleep. The knights are probably halfway across the campus too..."

Ariana froze mid-motion, her mind going into overdrive. 'I could run to the healer's quarters, but by the time I get there, this mystery figure might have already caused some catastrophic damage. What if the academy is in flames when I get back?'

Her face contorted with frustration. 'What if it's just a harmless student on a late-night walk? What if I'm making a huge deal out of nothing?'

She wrung her hands, eyes darting nervously. 'What if I just pretend I didn't see anything and go back to bed? No one would ever know.'

'But no.' Ariana shook her head resolutely. 'C'mon, Ariana. You can't ignore this. If something happens, you won't be able to live with yourself.' Her internal monologue was in full swing, and after a few seconds of self-debate, she let out a sigh.

"Alright. Let's do this," she said aloud, her voice far more confident than she felt. Her shoulders squared, her eyes narrowing with determination. 'I'll be a hero. I'll save the academy. And I'll probably get some extra credit for it.'

She crept forward, tiptoeing like a cat burglar on a mission, trying her best not to make a sound. The night seemed eerily quiet, the only sound being her own heartbeat pounding in her ears.

As she tiptoed through the academy grounds, her nerves started to settle, though a tiny part of her wondered if this was really a good idea.

But there was no turning back now. She was committed to saving the day, no matter how absurd it felt.

"Please don't be a supervillain, please don't be a supervillain," she whispered to herself, her footsteps barely a whisper against the stone floor.

Ariana trailed the figure from a safe distance. The faint glow of moonlight illuminated the academy pathways as she followed silently, her steps light and measured.

The figure's destination soon became apparent, and her brows furrowed in confusion. 'Galen's training grounds? What business do they have there?'

For a moment, she hesitated. 'Could it be Asher heading to train? Or maybe someone else up to something suspicious?' She shook the thought off and continued following, her intrigue only deepening.

When the figure slipped into the colosseum, Ariana lingered by the entrance, her breath caught in her throat. She waited a few seconds, ensuring she wouldn't be detected, then crept inside.

Moving on tiptoe, she slipped into the audience seats, crouching low behind the shadows of the benches. Her heart raced as she peeked through a gap, trying to catch a glimpse of the person now illuminated by the moonlight streaming through the open roof.

Her eyes widened in surprise, and her breath hitched. 'Wait... Liam?!'

For a moment, she stared, blinking to make sure she wasn't seeing things. There he stood, calm and composed, his silhouette cutting an imposing figure under the silver glow.

'What is he doing here so late at night?' she wondered, her thoughts racing.

Ariana steadied Liam, her gaze following his line of sight to the ground. At first, she didn't understand what had captivated his attention—until she saw it. His shadow rippled unnaturally, dark tendrils writhing like living smoke before expanding outward.

Her breath caught in her throat as the shadow began to take shape, its edges sharpening and stretching into a massive form. Wings unfurled from the darkness, horns spiraled upward, and a serpentine tail curled behind it.

"That's... a dragon?!" she thought, her mind racing. Fear clawed at her chest, but she forced herself to remain calm, biting her lip to keep from gasping aloud.

'Liam's a dark magic user, sure... but summoning a dragon?' The thought felt too absurd. Her heart pounded as she struggled to make sense of what she was witnessing. The dragon's sheer presence, even as a shadowy construct, sent chills down her spine.

As the creature fully materialized, towering and imposing, her gaze shifted back to Liam. He had stepped back, distancing himself from the dragon as if preparing for something.

"What is he doing?" she wondered, her curiosity rising despite her lingering fear.

Her sharp eyes caught the subtle movements of his hand, fingers curling and extending in a deliberate rhythm. It was as if he were counting, signaling the dragon with an unspoken command.

The dragon's eyes—or what passed for them—glimmered faintly in the dark, its massive body coiling with anticipation.

'He's planning something... but what?'

And then it hit her. The realization sent a jolt of panic through her. 'Wait... don't tell me he's about to—'

Present Time

Liam raised his hand, signaling the dragon. His voice was calm but commanding. "On my mark... three... two... one... go!"

At his command, the dragon opened its maw, releasing a torrent of fire. The flames, a brilliant light-blue hue, roared forward, surging toward Liam like a tidal wave of heat and destruction. Yet, he didn't flinch.

The fire engulfed him entirely, a wall of blazing energy consuming his figure until he vanished from sight. The dragon, its glowing eyes narrowed with concern, ceased its attack after a few seconds, closing its jaws. It waited, its tail flicking anxiously, the crackling flames casting shifting shadows across the ground.

As the fire began to die down, Liam's silhouette emerged, untouched and unscathed. He stepped through the fading embers, his clothes pristine, his expression calm as ever.

"Looks like my Myst Shielding is holding up well against your flames," he said, his voice steady as he approached the dragon. Inwardly, though, his mind churned with thought. 'If it had kept going, I might've been roasted alive.'

When he reached the dragon, it lowered its head, pressing its snout against him. Liam placed a hand on its scaly nose, a faint smirk tugging at his lips.

"Good job," he said, his tone softening. He glanced over his shoulder, scanning the area behind him. "And... you didn't burn anything. Impressive restraint."

The dragon rumbled, pleased with the praise, its tail swishing enthusiastically across the ground. Liam smirked faintly.

But the dragon's celebratory mood didn't last long. Its head suddenly snapped upward, its nostrils flaring as it sniffed the air. A low growl rumbled deep in its throat, and its tail stilled.

Liam immediately turned, his eyes narrowing as he followed the dragon's gaze to the audience stands.

'Someone's here,' he thought. His mind raced as he scanned the empty seats. 'Or something.'

The dragon's growl grew louder, its luminous eyes locked onto a shadowy section of the seats. Liam moved to its side, his hand resting on its snout to calm it as he scrutinized the area with a penetrating stare.

Suddenly, a figure emerged, arms raised high in surrender.

"Wait! Don't do anything! It's just me!"

Liam blinked as Ariana stepped into view, her voice cutting through the tension. She looked between Liam and the dragon nervously, her hands still raised.

Liam's stoic expression faltered for a split second, his brow twitching in faint disbelief. 'Ariana?'