

ShadowBound 91

Chapter 91: She's Been Caught

'When did she even get in here?' Liam thought, his sharp eyes narrowing slightly as he watched Ariana standing in the audience seats above.

She was completely calm, her presence as unassuming as a breeze, but it only made him more uneasy.

'More importantly... how did I not sense her? Even my dragon didn't pick up on her until now.' His mind raced, yet his expression remained stoic, betraying none of his thoughts.

"What are you doing here?" Liam asked, his tone measured, his voice carrying just enough weight to demand an answer.

Ariana flinched slightly at his question, her hands nervously fidgeting with the hem of her dress. "Um... I- I'm sorry for just appearing like this out of nowhere. But I swear I have a good explanation," she said, her words tumbling out quickly as if to defend herself before he could accuse her of anything.

Liam just looked her, waiting, his silence pressing her to continue.

"Actually," she began hesitantly, "I was heading back to my dorm when I saw someone—uh, you—walking outside. At first, I thought you were... well, a bad person. So I decided to follow you... just in case."

Her cheeks flushed a faint pink as she finished, her gaze darting to the floor as though ashamed of her reasoning.

Liam's brow furrowed ever so slightly, his thoughts swirling. 'She's been following me since I left the building? Yet neither I nor my dragon sensed her presence the entire time?'

"I'm really sorry for intruding like this," Ariana said again, bowing her head slightly, her voice sincere.

"There's no need to apologize," Liam replied evenly. "If anything, I'm at fault here. No one's supposed to be out this late at night anyway. I can understand why you were cautious—it's not wrong to be concerned." His tone was unexpectedly gentle, his words carrying a surprising amount of understanding.

Ariana blinked in surprise, her head snapping up to meet his eyes. Her cheeks turned a deeper shade of red as his words settled over her. She quickly looked away, her voice stammering. "Y-Yeah, you're right. That... makes sense."

Trying to calm her racing thoughts, she shifted her focus to the dragon behind him. The creature, which had initially been poised to attack, now sat like an obedient guard dog, tilting its massive head as it curiously observed Ariana.

Slowly, as if testing the waters, Ariana descended from the audience seats and walked toward the center of the arena where Liam stood.

Now standing beside Liam, she craned her neck to take in the dragon's full size. It was enormous, its scales shimmering faintly in the dim light, yet it wasn't as intimidating as she'd initially imagined.

The dragon tilted its head even further, letting out a low rumble that sounded almost like a purr. Ariana couldn't help but let a small, nervous smile tug at her lips.

"It's... not as scary up close as I thought," she murmured softly, glancing up at Liam.

"Can I touch it?" Ariana asked softly, her emerald eyes fixed on the dragon. The creature's shadowy form shimmered faintly, its ethereal presence both intimidating and mesmerizing.

Liam glanced at her, his expression as calm and unbothered as ever. "Yeah, sure. If it lets you. No problem."

Ariana hesitated for a moment before stretching her hand toward the dragon, her movements cautious but full of curiosity. Before she could get close, the dragon lowered its massive head, its shadowy snout hovering just inches from her hand.

Her eyes widened in surprise, and a warm smile spread across her face. Gently, she placed her hand on the dragon's snout, feeling its cool yet solid texture despite its shadowy appearance. The creature let out a low, rumbling sound of contentment, its tail swaying lazily behind it.

"Wow," Ariana murmured, her voice tinged with wonder. "I've never seen a dragon before... Or, well..." She paused, her brow furrowing slightly as she studied the creature's form. "It's not quite... physical, is it? But I can still feel it."

Liam placed his hands in his pocket, observing her.

"How can you summon a dragon like this? Isn't that supposed to take a lot of myst?" she asked, her hand still gently patting the dragon's snout.

"What do you mean?" Liam asked, his tone neutral.

"Well," she began, glancing back at him, "most mages can summon magical beasts, but summoning a dragon is rare. It's something that requires incredible myst reserves. So how were you doing this?"

The dragon seemed to relish her attention, closing its eyes and settling on the ground with a satisfied grunt. Its tail wagged lightly, creating faint ripples in the shadows around it.

Liam sighed softly, his stoic demeanor unwavering. "It's not summoning magic," he explained. "This dragon is here because I extracted its shadow after it died."

Ariana blinked, her hand pausing mid-pat. "Extracted its shadow?" she repeated, tilting her head in confusion. "I've never heard of that before."

For a moment, Liam debated whether to elaborate. 'If I don't explain, she's just going to keep asking. Might as well get it over with.' He let out another sigh, this one carrying a note of resignation.

"It's a dark magic technique," he said, his voice steady and matter-of-fact. "It allows me to extract the shadow of any dead being and make it mine to control."

Ariana's eyes widened in awe, her curiosity deepening. "Oh, so it's like... necromancy, but with shadows?"

"Pretty much," Liam replied.

"That's... actually really fascinating," she said, her gaze shifting back to the dragon. Her hand resumed its gentle patting, and the creature rumbled in approval, nuzzling closer to her.

Liam stepped closer, his presence commanding her attention without effort. His calm red eyes locked onto hers, and despite the soft glow of the moonlight, Ariana felt her cheeks heat up.

"Ariana, I have a question want to ask," he said, his tone steady but carrying a weight that made her heart race.

She turned to him quickly, flustered but trying to hide it. "O—Oh, alright," she stammered, her voice a pitch higher than she intended.

"How is it that I couldn't sense your presence at all, even though you followed me all the way here?"

Ariana flinched slightly, still feeling the pressure of his proximity. "Oh—uh... I just used a spell that erases my presence," she stammered, her cheeks flushed bright red as she cursed herself inwardly. 'He's way too close!'

Liam paused, a flicker of intrigue crossing his mind. A spell that erases presence? His eyes narrowed slightly as he processed her words.

"I see," he said, his voice smooth and detached. "That's all I wanted to know."

He turned, ready to leave the arena. However, he was about to command his dragon to return back into the abyss, a thought crept into his mind—one that made him pause mid-step.

"Actually, I have one more question for you."

