

ShadowBound 94

Chapter 94: Heading For The Capital

As the night wore on, Ariana guided Liam through the final Myst techniques. First was Myst Circulation, a method that allowed Myst to flow through the body to temporarily enhance physical abilities, though its effects were brief. Then came Myst Stabilization, a technique designed to regulate the flow of Myst within one's system, minimizing the risk of backlash during spellcasting.

Liam absorbed each lesson with his usual focus, committing them to memory with an efficiency that surprised even Ariana. When they were finished, Liam slowly rose to his feet, his movements deliberate yet graceful.

"I'm grateful for your help, Ariana," he said, his tone steady as always. "You've made things much easier for me. Now, I don't have to wait to learn what I truly wanted to master."

He extended a hand toward her, an unexpectedly considerate gesture that caught her off guard. For a moment, she stared at his outstretched hand, her cheeks warming as her thoughts stumbled. Finally, she collected herself and placed her hand in his, letting him help her to her feet.

"There's no need to thank me," Ariana said with a warm smile, her voice soft. "I'm sure you would've done the same for me."

Liam's gaze lingered on her for a moment, unreadable as ever. Her words sparked a quiet question in his mind. 'Would I have done the same for her if the roles were reversed?' he wondered.

To Ariana, helping Liam was simply the right thing to do—a gesture of goodwill anyone would extend to a friend in need. But to Liam, the idea wasn't so simple.

He had made it clear that she wasn't obligated to help him, leaving the choice entirely hers. Would he have offered the same effort under similar conditions? Perhaps, perhaps not.

Pushing the thought aside, Liam gave a small nod. "We should get going. There's still about three hours until sunrise. That's enough time for us to get a good sleep before school starts," he said, already turning toward the exit.

The statement was straightforward, but Ariana's imagination took a sharp turn. 'For us to sleep?!' Her mind spiraled into dangerous territory, imagining scenarios that made her cheeks flush a vivid red.

Liam paused and glanced over his shoulder, his expression as stoic as ever. "Aren't you coming?"

Snapping back to reality, Ariana scrambled to respond. "Y-Yes! I just remembered something, that's all!" she said, jogging lightly to catch up.

They walked in silence back to the dorms, the moonlight casting soft shadows along the path. Liam strode ahead with his hands in his pockets, his eyes fixed forward as if lost in thought. Ariana followed a step behind, stealing glances at him every so often.

When they reached the dormitory building, Liam stopped at the entrance and gave her a brief nod. "Goodnight, Ariana. And thank you

Far to the east of Zone 12, beyond the Academy's borders, a quiet farm nestled under the vast expanse of the night sky. Along a narrow dirt road, an old man guided his wooden wagon, the reins loosely held in one hand while he chewed on a stalk of wheat.

A single, weathered horse pulled the cart, its hooves echoing softly against the earth. The man wore simple farm clothes and a battered straw hat, slumped slightly in his seat as the weight of the day pressed on him.

"Hah, what a dreadful night," he muttered, the exhaustion lacing his voice. "If only I could just curl up and sleep right here." But he shook his head, the creak of the wagon filling the silence. "Not yet."

The road stretched endlessly, framed by shadowy trees and the occasional rustle of unseen creatures. Up ahead, a figure emerged from the darkness, standing still in the middle of the road. The old man squinted, his calloused hands tightening on the reins.

"Now, who in their right mind would be out here at this hour?" he muttered to himself. "Not that I'm one to talk."

Raising his voice, he called out, "Excuse me! Are you lost? It's dangerous to be wandering around out here alone!"

The figure didn't move or respond, standing unnervingly still.

"Hey! Did you hear me? I said it's—" His words faltered, caught in his throat, as the figure ahead began to change. Before his eyes, it split, as though the second figure had peeled itself out of the first.

A cold sweat broke out on the old man's brow, his hands trembling slightly as he slowed the wagon to a stop. The figures were larger now, towering and broad, their silhouettes distorted against the pale glow of the moon.

"Who... who's there?" he demanded, his voice unsteady as his fear deepened.

The figures began to move, their steps unnervingly calm as they approached the wagon. Each step seemed deliberate, echoing ominously in the stillness of the night.

"Come on, old man," one of them said, its voice smooth and dark, dripping with malice. "You're already here. No turning back now."

"That's right," the other figure added, its tone matching the first, steeped in a sinister pleasure. "You wouldn't want to make this a goose chase, would you?"

As they stepped into the moonlight, the old man's breath hitched. Their skin was a deep crimson, glistening faintly in the pale light. Two sharp horns jutted from their foreheads, their smiles revealing rows of jagged teeth.

Clawed hands hung at their sides, flexing slightly as though eager for action. The most chilling part was their identical faces, twisted in the same cruel grin.

"Choose." The two demons spoke in unison, their voices reverberating through the night.

Without hesitation, the old man yanked the reins, turning his wagon sharply around. "Hya!" he cried, urging his horse to move faster than it ever had before.

The wooden wheels creaked and groaned as the wagon jolted over the uneven path, but he didn't dare slow down.

Behind him, the twin demons bursts of menacing laughter rang out, chilling him to the bone.

"Looks like it is a goose chase after all," one of the demons mocked, its voice dripping with sinister glee.

"That's even better," the other added, laughing cruelly. "Run, old man. Run with your back to us. That makes it more fun."

The old man's heart pounded like a drum as he whipped the reins again. "How can this be happening? Demons... here? In Zone 12, of all places?!" His mind raced as fast as his wagon. "I was supposed to be home by now, sitting with my wife... having a quiet night's rest..."

He shook his head, trying to focus on escape. But an irresistible urge clawed at him—he had to know if they were following. Risking a glance over his shoulder, he squinted into the darkness.

Nothing.

The road was empty, eerily so. The demons had vanished.

"They're gone?" he whispered, his voice shaky. He slowed the horse ever so slightly, his eyes scanning the trees. "Did they take another route?"

But as he turned back to face the road ahead, his blood froze.

A claw, jagged and gleaming in the moonlight, was just inches from his face.

"We told you to run with your back to us," one of the demons growled, its voice a chilling snarl. "How dare you look?"

Before he could react, the demon slashed its claws cleanly through the old man's neck. His head severed from his body in a single swift motion, tumbling off the wagon as his lifeless torso crumpled to the ground.

The horse, oblivious to its master's fate, bolted into the distance, dragging the empty wagon behind it.

The demon stood in the middle of the road, gripping the old man's severed head in its clawed hand. It raised the head to its face, blood streaming from the neck and pooling onto the dirt below. Slowly, the demon opened its jagged maw, letting the blood flow into its mouth.

"Ahh..." it sighed, its voice thick with satisfaction. "There's nothing sweeter than the blood of a terrified human." Its tone oozed with cruel delight as it drank deeply.

The other demon loomed over the old man's lifeless body, planting its clawed foot on the corpse. "Seems like we've got a feast to fuel us for the journey ahead, eh, brother?" it sneered.

With deliberate precision, it drove its hand into the man's chest, tearing through flesh and bone until it reached the liver. The demon yanked it out, holding the still-warm organ in its hand before devouring it whole.

"You're right," the first demon said, tossing the empty head aside like a discarded trinket. Its blood-stained grin glinted in the moonlight. "Now, we head for the capital."