

ShadowBound 141

Chapter 141: The Smartest

"So what do you guys think? About the exams, I mean?" Dylan said, shoveling a full spoon of rice into his mouth without a care for table manners.

"From the way Mystica explained, I believe we're going to combine every theory class and write the exams for them all on the same day," Sheila replied calmly, sipping her water with an air of poise.

"Wow, that's gonna be so stressful," Dylan groaned, his words muffled by the food still in his mouth.

"Finish your food before you talk, you uncivilized idiot!" Asher barked, glaring at him with disdain. "Do you know what table manners even are?"

"Easy, tiger. Since when did you care about decency?" Dylan shot back with a smirk, his tone dripping with mockery.

Asher's eyes narrowed, ready to unleash a sharp retort, but before he could, Charlotte let out an exaggerated groan and flopped her head onto the table dramatically.

"Can you guys just drop it already? All this exam talk is giving me a headache," she mumbled, her voice muffled against her folded arms.

Sheila arched an elegant eyebrow, clearly intrigued. "You're not usually like this. Don't tell me you're actually scared of the exams?"

"Well," Charlotte began, tilting her head slightly to the side, "that's half of it. I hate anything to do with words, so the theory part is already killing me slowly."

"And the other half?" Dylan prompted, leaning forward eagerly, clearly enjoying the drama.

Charlotte raised her head just enough to shoot a pointed look at Liam, who was quietly eating his meal and appeared utterly detached from the conversation. "The second half is that Bae over here barely even acknowledges me, and it's really starting to hurt, you know?"

At this, all eyes turned toward Liam, who remained oblivious, lost in his own thoughts.

"Hey, Liam. Hey—hey," Dylan nudged him in the arm repeatedly until Liam finally looked up, his expression as stoic as ever.

"Hm? What?" Liam replied, his tone flat, as though he'd just returned from a thousand-yard stare.

"Wow," Dylan said, shaking his head in mock amazement. "You really know how to zone out, even in a place this noisy." He gestured around the bustling cafeteria, full of chatter and clattering plates.

"I was just thinking about something, that's all," Liam said simply, scooping another spoonful of food.

Dylan grinned and leaned in closer, dropping his voice to a conspiratorial tone. "Well, you might wanna start thinking about something else, like maybe your 'Bae' over here." He jerked a thumb toward Charlotte. "She's in a very sad mood because you haven't been paying her any attention. C'mon, man, show a little heart."

Liam raised an eyebrow but didn't bother responding. Instead, his crimson eyes flicked toward Charlotte, who was still resting her head on the table. Their eyes met for a brief moment.

"..."

Liam's silence spoke volumes—or maybe it didn't. Either way, he calmly resumed eating, as though nothing had happened.

"See what I mean?" Charlotte whined, throwing her hands up theatrically. "He doesn't even say anything!" She buried her face in her arms again, letting out a fake sob. "How am I supposed to survive this kind of emotional neglect?"

Before anyone could respond, Charlotte peeked up with a mischievous gleam in her eye. "But then again," she said, her tone shifting to sultry in an instant, "those sexy, bloody eyes of his just looked right into my soul, so I guess I'll forgive him." She bit her lower lip, her expression oozing with playful seduction.

Sheila nearly choked on her drink, Dylan burst into laughter, and Ariana blinked, utterly dumbfounded.

"Wow," Dylan said through his laughter. "Switching back to your usual self that fast? You're a real piece of work, kitty."

"What can I say?" Charlotte purred, resting her chin on her palm and giving Liam a slow, teasing smile. "It's hard to keep up an act when Bae stares at me like that. It's like he's peeling away all my layers."

Liam had heard everything around him but chose to ignore it. He quietly placed his cutlery down and turned his gaze to Ariana.

"Ariana, can you help me with something?"

Ariana froze, her spoon hovering just inches from her mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise. "Ye—Yeah, sure. Anything," she stammered, setting her spoon down nervously.

"Thank you. I just needed to know—do you have any idea how the theoretical exams are going to be like?" Liam asked, his voice calm and composed.

The unexpected question caught Ariana so off guard that she inhaled sharply, causing her to choke on her own saliva. She coughed lightly, her cheeks burning in embarrassment.

Liam raised a hand slightly, signaling her to take her time, then continued with his usual directness. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm asking because I feel you might have a fraction of an idea. As Mystica's apprentice, you might have some insight—not that I expect her to give you any unfair advantage. It's just that, in terms of theoretical knowledge, I think you're the smartest person here. Honestly, probably the smartest in the entire class."

Ariana froze. The words had been delivered in Liam's typical flat tone, but the compliment hit like a thunderbolt. Her cheeks flushed a deep red, far brighter than the faint pink she'd experienced before. Liam Hunter—the stoic, unreadable enigma of their group—had just praised her intelligence.

After a few seconds of silence, she cleared her throat and adjusted her glasses to avoid fumbling her response. "Well, um, I understand what you mean. No need to explain further." She glanced down at the table briefly to compose herself before continuing.

"First of all, Mystica hasn't shared anything about the exams with me. I was as surprised as the rest of you when I heard about them. However," she added, her confidence growing as she shifted into an analytical mode, "I think I have an idea of how the theoretical exams will be structured."

"You do? C'mon, tell us! Pretty please?" Dylan chimed in, practically bouncing in his seat. He clasped his hands together and gave Ariana his best attempt at puppy eyes, which only managed to look hilariously awkward.

Ariana chuckled softly, shaking her head before answering. "Well, unlike mage exams, which are tailored to the specific magical specialization chosen by the student, knight academies like ours take a different approach. Everyone learns the same core subjects—history, myst theory, combat applications, and so on. But for students like me, who are here as apprentices under higher-ranked mages like Mystica, there's an additional layer. We'll likely have extra theoretical exams focused on our chosen specializations."

"I see," Liam murmured, his eyes narrowing slightly in thought as he processed her words.

"You mentioned specialization in magic, right?" he asked after a moment.

"Yes," Ariana confirmed.

"Do you mind telling me what Mystica's main specialization is? Since she's a Primordial, she has an affinity with all elements, but she must favor something specific. Unlike other mages who focus solely on, say, light or nature magic, she must have a unique approach."

Ariana tilted her head thoughtfully, as if organizing her thoughts. "Oh, I see where you're coming from. If you've paid close attention to her abilities, it's clear Mystica specializes in spells tied to Spatial Magic. She frequently uses teleportation spells and other spells that involve bending space. That's her primary strength, even though she has access to every element."

Liam nodded slowly, absorbing the information. "Spatial Magic, huh? Makes sense. That would explain some of the things I've seen her do."

"Anyway, thank you for the information," Liam added.

"Yeah, Ariana, that was really helpful. At least now we know we don't have to worry as much," Sheila said with a warm smile.

"Yeah, I suppose that helps... or whatever," Asher muttered, attempting to maintain his usual aloof demeanor as he scooped up another bite of food.

Dylan immediately picked up on Asher's half-hearted gratitude and smirked. "Oh, is that your way of saying 'thank you,' tiger?" he teased, his voice dripping with mockery.

"Shut up!..." Asher snapped, glaring at Dylan before letting out an exasperated sigh. He shifted his focus to Liam, his brow furrowing in thought. "Anyway, I was wondering why Galen told us we were supposed to come back to him after this month, especially when he clearly knew we were going to have exams. Doesn't that seem... off?"

"Yeah, you're right," Sheila chimed in, her eyes narrowing in recollection. "Lady Ember told me something similar when I switched instructors to Mystica last month."

"Same here," Charlotte added with a casual shrug. "Sir Kaelen mentioned something like that, though honestly, I wasn't really paying attention. He tends to go on and on."

Liam's eyes flickered with understanding as he leaned back slightly in his chair. "Just like Mystica said, '...to see how you react to a sudden change in plans...' If I had to guess, it's all part of their test. Throwing us off balance to see how we adapt."

The group fell silent for a moment, each of them digesting Liam's observation.

Dylan, having lost interest in the heavy topic, leaned back in his seat with a loud yawn. "Man, all this talk about space magic and exams is making my head hurt. Can we get back to eating? Or better yet, let's talk about how Charlotte plans to ace the theory exams with her amazing attention span." He smirked, nudging Charlotte, who immediately shot him a glare.