

ShadowBound 148

Chapter 148: Theory Exam

Throughout the remaining of the weekend, Liam and Asher continued training together, but only at night when they wouldn't be disturbed. Liam learned quickly, mastering the control of fire's power and intensity to maneuver freely at astonishing speeds.

It wasn't just Liam who was improving—Asher was growing stronger too. He wasn't about to let Liam be the only one benefiting from their sessions. As with the first night, their training often escalated into spirited spars, driving both to push their limits.

Their commitment to mastering Flame Concentration left little time for their friends, though they still joined them for dinner at the cafeteria and occasionally studied together in the library. When Ariana, Sheila, Charlotte, and Dylan recounted Galen's enraged warning to Asher, his reaction was just as Dylan had predicted: complete cluelessness. Liam, however, knew exactly what had happened but kept silent. Still, the knowledge didn't deter him from continuing his nightly training with Asher, much to Galen's frustration.

Every morning, Galen found his once-pristine training ground in ruins—scorched, cracked, and battered—forcing the Earth manipulators to repair the damage, again and again. What infuriated him most wasn't just the destruction, but his inability to catch Asher in the act. That changed the day before the theory exam.

On that night, Liam and Asher planned a brief training session to avoid overexertion before the exams. Their plan unraveled when Galen finally caught them. His joy at apprehending Asher was eclipsed only by his surprise—and delight—at discovering Liam, who he didn't think would ever be on the same page with Asher, was also involved.

Galen drilled the living hell out of them, pushing the two boys through an intense regimen that lasted until two hours past midnight. He ultimately let them go, a rare act of mercy, knowing his original plan would have left them too exhausted to take either the theory or practical exams. He never admitted it, but part of him grudgingly respected their dedication to improving their fire magic skills.

Exhausted but chastened, the boys headed straight to bed, heeding Galen's stern warning against trying to train elsewhere. They rested well enough to face the next day's challenges.

As the sun rose over the academy, students bustled about, heading to their classrooms. The first years, however, congregated in the cafeteria, fueling up for the grueling seven-hour theory exam ahead. For some, it was a matter of ensuring they didn't tackle the mental marathon on an empty stomach, which might lead to sudden death. For others, like Dylan, it was an attempt to eat their anxiety away.

At their usual table, the group had gathered. Dylan piled his plate high with food, while Ariana and Sheila ate with their typical elegance. Charlotte, on the other hand, joined Dylan in stress-eating, her usual composure nowhere to be found.

Meanwhile, Asher and Liam sat nearby. Asher, still recovering from Galen's grueling punishment and tormented by the constant growling of his stomach during his sleep, devoured his meal with the gusto of a starving beast. Liam, in contrast, appeared unbothered. Years of enduring harsh conditions in the Dark Forest had hardened him, and though he felt the hunger, he bore it with practiced ease.

After breakfast, the first-year students were summoned to the exam hall. A quiet hum of anxiety filled the air as they began filing in, each assigned a seat five feet apart to ensure ample space. The massive hall was eerily silent, save for the shuffle of shoes on the cold stone floor and the occasional nervous cough.

Dylan, ever the skeptic, stood by the door, trying to charm his way out of the whole ordeal.

"Professor, are you sure this is necessary?" Dylan asked, flashing the elderly instructor a wide grin, his fingers drumming against the chair in mock nonchalance. "I mean, we've been studying, right? And I've been working so hard. Maybe I could just, uh, skip the exam? You know, for the greater good. Like, the preservation of my sanity."

The professor, a no-nonsense woman with small reading glasses perched on her nose, gave Dylan a look that could freeze water.

"Mr. Wellington, if you don't sit down and take your exam, I'll make sure the next two weeks of your life are spent cleaning the academy's library—front and back—every day."

Dylan's eyes widened in horror.

"Wait—wait! You can't just give me library duty! Have mercy! I'm a gentleman! A man of leisure!" he protested, attempting to feign distress, but the professor was unmoved.

"No mercy," she said flatly, pointing to his seat. "Sit down. Now."

With a dramatic sigh, Dylan shuffled to his seat, slumping down in defeat and casting one last hopeless glance at the professor. His mind raced with excuses, but he knew none of them would work.

As the last student took their seat, the professor began distributing the exam papers. Dylan could practically hear his soul leave his body as the papers were passed down the rows. He stared at the one that landed in front of him, half-expecting it to burst into flames.

The first few words were enough to send a chill down his spine: Magical Theory: Intermediate Concepts, History of Arcane Civilizations, Beast Classification and Behavior, and—most terrifying of all—Demons: Types and Weaknesses.

"Oh, no," Dylan groaned, dropping his head onto the desk with a dull thud. His arms flopped around the exam paper in a desperate attempt to push it away, as though the sheer force of will might make the questions disappear.

Liam, sitting five seats to his left, merely raised an eyebrow at Dylan's display. Asher, however, glanced over with a grin, shaking his head.

"You good there, blondie?" Asher asked, his voice dangerously close to an amused laugh.

Dylan barely lifted his head, his face twisted in agony. "No. I'm not. I'm already in hell, and it's made of questions." He sat up slightly, trying to scan the paper without spiraling into full-blown panic. "History of the—oh, great, a history question. How much time do we have to answer this, five minutes? I bet I could write something vaguely related and hope for the best."

The professor's voice cut through the room, sending a wave of dread over the students.

"You will have exactly seven hours to complete the exam, with no breaks. You are not to leave your seat unless you have permission, and you must remain silent throughout the duration."

"Seven hours?!" Dylan's head snapped up in shock. "I thought it was a joke when the Headmaster said it. How do you expect anyone to survive that? This is torture!"

"No talking, Mr. Wellington," the professor snapped. "If you continue, I'll add another hour to your exam time. Understood?"

Dylan's eyes widened, and he immediately fell silent, realizing this was a battle he was not going to win. He glanced back at the paper, his fingers trembling as he held the pencil. The flood of questions before him now seemed like an insurmountable mountain.

He slowly reached for the first question, eyeing it like it might bite: What are the key components of the Arcane Heart used in summoning beasts, and what are the associated rituals and their origins?

Dylan nearly choked on his own breath. "Components of the Arcane Heart?! What is this, the beastology finals?"

In the seat to his right, Ariana shot him a look and smiled faintly, her calm demeanor a stark contrast to his panicked state. "You'll be fine, Dylan. Just take it slow."

"Slow?" Dylan muttered, his voice barely a whisper. "This paper's gonna eat me alive. The Arcane Heart? I've only ever seen that in bedtime stories about ancient evils!"

Sheila, seated at the other end of the hall, cast a quick glance at the boys, but her focus remained fixed on her paper. "Honestly, Dylan, stop making a scene. There are demons in this exam. Real ones. Focus, and you might survive."

Dylan sank back in his chair. "I'm not worried about surviving, I'm worried about passing! This is the exam from the underworld!"

Liam, ever the picture of calm, barely reacted to Dylan's complaints. He'd already set his mind on the exam, flipping through the pages with steady focus. 'Honestly speaking, Dylan's right, though. This thing is even making my brain hurt.'

Dylan's eyes shifted between Liam and his paper, wondering how the hell his friend made it look so easy. "This is your fault, Liam," he muttered under his breath, eyes darting to the first question again. "I bet you know everything in this exam. Fire magic, Beastology, flame-themed trivia... It's all connected to you somehow, isn't it?"

Liam didn't flinch, but Max, who was just sitting behind Dylan, did. "Please Dylan, a little quiet will do." Max not being good with 'words' just like Charlotte, was close to passing out as much as Dylan.

Dylan's shoulders slumped as he began scribbling down whatever came to mind. The next seven hours stretched before him like an eternity of confusion, magical history, and agonizing mental gymnastics.