

ShadowBound 150

Chapter 150: Possibilities

As the group stepped out of the exam hall, Dylan led the way with an exaggerated swagger, arms swinging dramatically. His grin was wide enough to rival the horizon, and he strutted like a king returning from a victorious campaign.

Behind him, the rest of the group dragged their weary bodies forward, looking as though they had just survived a seven-hour war.

"Food," Dylan declared, his voice echoing across the courtyard like a battle cry. "The only cure for this mental torture. I've earned it, and now I shall feast like a champion."

Charlotte, walking beside Ariana, scoffed and crossed her arms. "Champion of what? Sleeping through the last hour?"

Dylan turned, grinning. "Exactly! My strategic retreat into the land of dreams was necessary to preserve my brilliant mind. You wouldn't understand."

"You mean your mind that was writing nonsense for hours?" Asher added, not even trying to hide his smirk.

"Details, details." Dylan waved a dismissive hand. "What matters is that I finished first. Efficiency at its finest!"

"Sure, if you call drooling on your desk efficient," Sheila quipped, earning a round of chuckles from the group.

As they stepped into the cafeteria, the warm scent of freshly baked bread and sizzling meat wrapped around them like a comforting embrace. The room buzzed with energy as students shared stories of their exam ordeals. For Dylan, though, there was no time for conversation—his eyes locked onto the serving line, gleaming with predatory focus.

"Out of my way, mortals!" he exclaimed, grabbing a tray and piling it high with roasted chicken, bread rolls, and a questionable green soup that even the servers seemed hesitant to touch.

Max eyed the soup with visible skepticism. "You're actually eating that?"

Dylan grinned, holding up the bowl like a trophy. "Survival is about risks, my friend. Only the brave thrive."

"I'll stick to not poisoning myself, thanks," Max replied, shaking his head as he opted for a safer choice of grilled meat and rice.

The rest of the group filled their trays with varying levels of enthusiasm. Ariana carefully selected a modest portion of salad and fish, while Asher heaped his plate with an alarming amount of steak and potatoes.

"If I'm gonna die during the practical exam," Asher said, balancing his mountain of food, "at least I'll go out on a full stomach."

The group found a table by the window, the sunlight casting a golden glow on their weary faces. Dylan wasted no time, tearing into his food like a man who hadn't eaten in days.

"You could at least pretend to have table manners," Sheila muttered, looking mildly horrified as Dylan devoured a drumstick in two bites.

Dylan grinned mid-chew. "I'm optimizing digestion. Peak efficiency, remember?"

Charlotte rolled her eyes but smirked. "Sure, keep telling yourself that, champ."

As the conversation shifted, Max leaned back in his chair and posed a question that made everyone pause. "So... how do you guys think the practical exam groups are gonna be set up?"

Sheila nodded, her brows furrowing. "Yeah, the headmaster did say we wouldn't get to choose. I wonder what they're basing the teams on."

The question hung in the air like an unsolved puzzle. Slowly, everyone turned their gaze toward one person—Liam, who was eating his food with the same calm indifference he always carried. The weight of their stares eventually made him glance up, fork halfway to his mouth.

"What?" he asked, his tone flat but tinged with confusion.

"Well," Sheila began, clearing her throat, "your critical thinking about this kind of stuff is usually on point. So, I figured you'd have some idea."

"Yeah," Ariana chimed in, her voice soft, her cheeks slightly pink. "You're good at analyzing things."

Liam narrowed his eyes slightly but didn't respond. Instead, he continued eating, as if their expectations weren't his problem.

Charlotte smirked, leaning forward with a teasing glint in her eye. "Pfft. That's why you were all staring at him? Wow, for a second there, I thought I had competition for my bae." Her tone was playfully suggestive as she glanced at Liam. "Y'all are lucky I'm not the jealous type."

"Wait," she added, her gaze shifting to Max, who suddenly looked very uncomfortable. "Why were you staring at my bae, huh? Don't tell me you're into guys now."

Max's eyes widened in alarm. "What? No! I only looked because they did. Why would I be into guys? That's not—"

Charlotte burst out laughing, cutting him off. "Relax, tiger. I was kidding. But the way you panicked just now? Suspicious." She gave him a wink, which only made Max groan and bury his face in his hands.

Asher, who had been silently demolishing his steak, glanced at Liam with a smirk. "You know, they aren't wrong. You've got a knack for figuring out this kind of stuff."

Liam finished his last bite with his usual calm, leaning back in his chair. His eyes glinted slightly as he looked at Asher. "Since when did you start agreeing with people on their opinions about me?"

Asher rolled his eyes and pointed his fork at Liam. "Don't twist my words, dude. I'm not desperate for answers like they are. Besides," he grinned and puffed his chest out, "it doesn't matter who I get stuck with. I'm gonna shine the brightest, no matter what."

"Good for you," Liam replied flatly, his voice laced with disinterest.

Liam exhaled before speaking. "If you're really wondering about how the groups will be assigned, there's something you should've already noticed by now.

"From Mystica to the headmaster's announcement, one phrase kept repeating: your ability to stay composed under pressure in diverse situations." Liam began

"Based on that, you can be sure of one thing: you won't be in the same group as the people you're close to or comfortable with."

The group fell into thoughtful silence, his words sinking in like heavy stones in a calm lake.

"But," Ariana spoke up, her eyes thoughtful behind her glasses, "if the groups are large—say, ten or fifteen people—wouldn't the chances of being with someone you know well increase?"

Liam shook his head, his expression calm. "No, it wouldn't. Even in a group that size, the probability of being placed with someone you're close to is still low. The organizers will deliberately spread connections thin to force us into unpredictable dynamics. You might end up with a classmate, but that's about it."

"Why go to such lengths, though?" Sheila asked, her brows furrowing. "Wouldn't it make more sense to put people who work well together in the same group?"

"Why go to such lengths, though?" Sheila asked, her brows furrowing in thought. "Wouldn't it make more sense to group people who work well together? That way, we'd maximize efficiency."

Liam's eyes flicked toward her, his expression unreadable. "Sometimes, you're too naïve," he said bluntly. "This isn't about what makes sense—it's about forcing us to adapt. The goal isn't to see how well we perform in comfort zones. It's to test how we survive, strategize, and excel when we're thrown into situations with people we don't trust or understand. If they handed us a safety net, there wouldn't be a challenge to overcome."

Sheila blinked, her lips parting as she processed his words, but before she could respond, Asher leaned back in his chair with a smirk. "Exactly," he said, folding his arms behind his head. "They want to push us out of our bubbles. See who sinks and who swims. If we stuck to the same tricks we always use, they'd never know who can really rise under pressure."

"Pretty much," Liam agreed. "So don't get too attached to the idea of familiar faces. If you do, you'll only end up disappointed when the exam starts."

The group exchanged glances, the weight of his analysis sinking in. Even Dylan, who was still chewing on his dessert, paused mid-bite to mull over Liam's words.

"Well," Dylan finally said, swallowing a massive chunk of cake, "whatever the groups are, one thing's for sure."

"What's that?" Sheila asked, raising a brow.

Dylan grinned. "I'll still be the MVP."

Charlotte groaned. "You? The MVP? Please, you're more like the comic relief."

"Yeah, but at least I'll keep things interesting!" Dylan shot back, winking at her.