

ShadowBound 222

Chapter 222: Another Round Of Guessing

As the weekend arrived, students scattered across the academy, engrossed in their studies—some working individually, others in groups. With the end-of-semester exams just a week away, no one dared to slack off like they had during the midterms. Back then, the threat of expulsion had loomed over them, a fear tactic that kept them on edge. This time, they knew it had been an empty threat, yet the lesson had stuck. No one wanted to repeat their past mistakes.

Determined to prove themselves, the students took this as a chance to show the academy that its so-called "second chance" system had worked. They had realized the need to step up.

Throughout the week leading up to the exams, professors and instructors made one thing clear—there would be no written tests this time. The exams would be purely practical, focusing on combat and real-world application.

However, the exact details remained a mystery. All they were told was that the Headmaster himself would reveal the full scope of the exams on the third day of the coming week.

In one of the academy's libraries, Liam and his group sat around a table, speculating about the upcoming exam, much like they had during the midterms. Well, most of them were. Dylan, being the dramatic whiner he always was, had abandoned all pretense of studying. He lay sprawled across a nearby table, mock-sulking as if the weight of the world had crushed his spirit.

"I can't believe these people expect us to suffer through another round of terrifying days in Vlardia. Have they no mercy for us, the poor, innocent children?" he groaned, rolling from side to side like a man mourning his lost freedom.

"You sure like to complain a lot, Dylan," Sheila said, seated properly at the table, flipping through a book. "And besides, I doubt they'd send us back to Vlardia."

"Wow, Lady Sheila," Dylan drawled, lifting his head just enough to smirk. "I had no idea you were an esteemed associate of the academy's higher-ups."

"I never said that, you idiot," Sheila shot back. "I'm just making a logical guess."

"Pfft, nice way of calling him dumb," Max whispered, nudging Sheila with his elbow.

"You dare speak of dumbness, my dear Max?" Dylan said, suddenly rising like Dracula from his coffin, eyes gleaming with mischief.

Max instantly regretted running his mouth. He knew what was coming. Dylan was about to bring up the midterm theory exam—the one where he placed eighth, while Max barely scraped into sixty-first. The smugness radiating from Dylan was suffocating.

Yep. He had just dug his own grave. Again.

Max's face twitched as he avoided Dylan's gaze, pretending to suddenly find the table's wood grain very interesting. But Dylan wasn't about to let this go. He leaned forward, a wicked grin stretching across his face.

"You know, Max," Dylan began, his voice laced with exaggerated sympathy, "I admire your dedication. It must take true commitment to stay that consistently low in the rankings."

Max clenched his jaw. "Shut up, Dylan."

"Ohhh," Dylan gasped dramatically, placing a hand over his chest. "The hostility! The wounded pride! Don't be mad, Maxie. After all, not everyone can be a genius like me."

"Yeah, genius," Asher scoffed from across the table, flipping a page in his book without looking up. "Didn't you barely survive that past practical exam? Clearly not knowing what to do or eat?"

Dylan immediately sat up straighter, offended. "Excuse you, I was experimenting. Everything I did was part of my master plan!"

"Right," Asher said flatly. "Because surviving on just insects for three days is the best."

Liam, who had been silent until now, exhaled through his nose—his version of a laugh.

Dylan shot him a betrayed look. "Oh, you think it's funny too? I'll have you know, I have many strengths."

"Being annoying isn't a strength," Liam said.

Dylan gasped again, this time genuinely offended. "Okay, wow. Betrayal at every corner." He flopped back onto the table with a groan. "This is why I say we should just riot. No exam, no stress."

"I'm with you on that, sweet Dylan," Charlotte murmured, her head resting on her arms.

"See? Charlotte gets it!" Dylan exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air. "A riot must happen! We must rise up against the tyranny of the higher-ups!"

"Hate to break it to you," Ariana said, absentmindedly fidgeting with her book, "but even if all hundred of us rioted, it wouldn't matter. We're nowhere near the level of our professors and instructors."

Dylan groaned dramatically and collapsed back onto the table. "Ugh, screw all of this, then."

Liam turned his gaze to Sheila. "Anyway, Sheila—you said the higher-ups wouldn't send us back to Vlardia. Why is that?"

Sheila straightened slightly. "Oh, that. Well, ever since my brother, Percy, enrolled in this academy, my parents kept talking about a few specific exams he had to take every semester. Until I joined this year, I never paid much attention, but..." She paused for a moment. "From what I remember, some of those

exams were designed to throw students into real-life scenarios—more like holographic simulations—where they had to complete objectives within a set time limit."

Sheila tucked a strand of white hair behind her ear before continuing, "But they never really explained how it actually worked. Probably didn't want me to become a spoiled child expecting hints."

From his position on the table, Dylan let out a tired chuckle. "First of all, you are a spoiled princess."

Sheila shot him a glare, but before she could retort, he sat up, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. "Second—if you knew about this, does that mean you also knew about the midterm exam? The one that hit us like a slap out of nowhere?"

Sheila crossed her arms. "Hold your horses, Dylan. The midterm exam caught me just as off guard as everyone else."

"And also—I am not spoiled, you jerk."

"Can't say that's true, ponytail," Asher chimed in, not even looking up from his book. "You are spoiled."

Sheila scoffed, flipping her hair over her shoulder. "You guys just love to slander me for no reason."

"Nah, there's plenty of reason," Dylan said, leaning back in his chair. "You live in a palace, you wear clothes tailored by royal designers, and I'm pretty sure you've never had to worry about running out of Myst Crystals in your life."

Sheila rolled her eyes. "So what? That doesn't make me spoiled."

"That's literally the definition of spoiled," Asher said flatly, turning a page.

Sheila huffed, crossing her arms. "Whatever. Let's get back on topic."

Liam, who had been watching the back-and-forth with mild amusement, spoke up. "So, you think this exam will be some kind of holographic simulation?"

Sheila nodded. "That's my guess. My parents always made it sound like a big deal, something designed to push students to their limits without actual danger."

Max, who had been listening quietly, raised an eyebrow. "Okay, but what if they are sending us somewhere real this time? The academy did lie about expelling people in the midterms."

A tense silence fell over the group as that realization sank in.

"...Oh, sh*t," Dylan muttered. "What if this time, they just straight-up drop us into a warzone?"

Charlotte, still resting her head on her arms, yawned. "Wouldn't be surprised. They do love making our lives miserable."

"Great," Dylan groaned. "Just great. This is why I said we should riot."

"No one is rioting, Dylan," Ariana said with a sigh.

"Ugh, fine. I hear you, Ari. No rioting—just waiting four days for the Headmaster to drop an announcement about another fresh hell of an exam on us." Dylan sighed dramatically, sinking further into his seat.

But then, his eyes flickered with sudden realization. He glanced around, confusion creeping onto his face before he let out a dry chuckle.

"Wait... if the exam is all practical, why the hell are we in the library reading books? Shouldn't we be, I don't know, sparring or something?"

Silence.

Sheila, Ariana, and Asher—who had been deeply immersed in their books—froze mid-read, slowly processing the absurdly valid point Dylan had just made.

Max and Charlotte straightened up in their chairs, suddenly aware of the fact that they'd been sitting in a library, doing absolutely nothing practical, when the upcoming exam was purely hands-on.

Liam let out a small, amused huff as he stood from his seat. "Funny how you of all people managed to make us look like idiots—just by using common sense."

Dylan smirked. "It's a gift."

Liam stretched his arms before glancing at the group. "Well, no point wasting time. We should probably get to training—like Dylan said."