

ShadowBound 227

Chapter 227: Let Them Be

For the five days leading up to the exams, all classes were suspended. Professors and instructors left the students to prepare however they saw fit—whether through relentless training, strategic planning, or desperate last-minute cramming.

The academy grounds buzzed with activity. Some students sparred in the training halls, sharpening their combat skills. Others buried themselves in study chambers, poring over spell theories and tactical strategies. A few, however, opted for rest, choosing to conserve their strength before the inevitable storm.

Liam and his friends chose training.

Inside one of the academy's private training halls, Liam, Asher, Max, and Charlotte were locked in a chaotic four-way sparring match. Dylan and Ariana stood on an elevated viewpoint, observing the clash unfold.

"Why don't you join them?" Ariana asked, her gaze still fixed on the fight.

Dylan, lounging lazily on the ground, scoffed. "Join them? Pfft, over my dead body. Have you seen them? They look like rabid animals fighting for territory. And besides, I'm an archer. Close combat isn't exactly my thing."

Ariana nodded but didn't look away. "That's true... but I do remember you saying you wanted to pick up some close-combat skills. You know, so you don't become too dependent on long-range attacks."

"Yeah, I did say that. But that doesn't mean I'm willing to throw myself into the pit with those lunatics," Dylan replied, stretching his arms behind his head.

Then, he turned to Ariana with a sly grin. "But tell me something, Ari. You're a full-fledged mage, yet you've been jumping into these little combat drills for the past few days. What's with the sudden change, hmm?"

His teasing tone made Ariana shift uncomfortably.

"Don't tell me you're doing it for Liam, are you?" He smirked, breaking into laughter when he caught the slight blush creeping onto her face.

Ariana huffed, looking away.

"Relax, Ari. It's actually a good thing," Dylan chuckled. "Just make sure you pick up a few tricks from Liam, Sheila, or even our resident crackhead, Asher, before the exams start. Buuuut, not that a gentleman like myself would ever leave a fair lady like you to fend for herself."

Before Ariana could respond, the training hall doors creaked open.

Sheila stepped inside.

Despite her composed demeanor, there was a telltale weariness in her posture. As the student leader, she had spent the past two days trying to rally her peers, ensuring everyone was on the same page for the upcoming exams. Some students were cooperative, and with the help of those she had fought alongside during the midterms, Sheila managed to get the majority of them to work together.

But not everyone was willing to listen.

Some, like Chris, outright rejected her leadership. Why should someone who doesn't belong to the Eastern Region be in charge? That was the common sentiment among her detractors. Others simply disliked Sheila for reasons she couldn't change.

And that, more than anything, was exhausting.

Sheila exhaled softly, tucking a stray strand of white hair behind her ear as she scanned the room. Her gaze lingered on the heated sparring match before shifting to Ariana and Dylan.

"Still not joining today, Dylan?" she asked, her voice calm.

Dylan smirked. "Of course not. I'm practicing something called energy conservation—you should try it sometime."

Sheila rolled her eyes but didn't bother arguing. Instead, she turned to Ariana, who had straightened slightly under her attention. "How have you been, Ariana?"

"I've been good. Just trying to keep up with you guys," Ariana replied with a small smile.

Sheila caught the brief glance Ariana threw in Liam's direction but chose not to comment. Instead, she nodded approvingly. "That's good. You're doing great, by the way—unlike someone."

"I know you're talking about me, princess," Dylan said, grinning.

Asher, dodging an incoming strike from Max, overheard and called out. "Sheila, you should hop in! These guys aren't letting me release enough steam!"

Charlotte, mid-air, shifted into her jaguar hybrid form to evade Liam's sword strike. She snorted. "You sure have some hot balls to say that when you haven't landed a single hit on me."

"Well, in case you haven't noticed—we aren't FIGHTING!" Asher shot back, sending a blazing kick toward Max, who backflipped out of the way.

"Then let's change targets," Charlotte said with a grin.

Before Asher could react, she sprang high into the air to evade Liam's next strike and then darted straight toward him, her claws outstretched.

At the last second, Asher caught the movement in his peripheral vision and managed to duck just in time. Charlotte's claws barely missed his head as she flew over him.

"Damn, that was close," he muttered.

Unfortunately for Max, who was crouched on the floor recovering, he had no time to react before Charlotte landed on him, pinning him down effortlessly.

"TIME OUT! TIME OUT!" he yelled, squirming beneath her.

Charlotte loomed over him, a mischievous glint in her golden eyes, before shifting back into her normal form.

"You sure were lucky, Asher," she teased, her smirk widening as Max groaned beneath her.

As he let out an exaggerated groan, Charlotte finally rolled off him, standing up with an air of smug satisfaction. Max, meanwhile, remained sprawled on the ground, staring at the ceiling.

"I'm so done with this," he muttered.

"You good? You seem exhausted. " Liam asked, his voice as calm as ever while he sheathed his sword.

Max sat up with a glare. "Dude, I was the only one who followed the no going all out rule. Meanwhile, Asher's out here throwing fire, and Charlotte's one step away from mauling someone!"

Asher stretched lazily, rolling his shoulders. "Hey, I was holding back—I didn't even use my flames. Maybe just once"

Charlotte grinned, flashing her canines. "And I could've gone for the throat."

Max paled slightly. "...Right. And you wonder why Dylan won't join in."

Dylan, still lounging on the ground, smirked. "Exactly. I have brains—unlike some people here."

"Yeah, yeah, keep talking," Asher said, waving Dylan off before turning to Sheila. "So, how's your little leadership mission going?"

Sheila let out a sigh, rubbing her temple. "Don't even remind me. Chris is stirring things up, and it's actually working. Some people are buying into his nonsense."

Asher scoffed, wiping sweat from his brow. "Then forget them. You've already got the majority backing you—why waste energy on a bunch of insecure punks with superiority complexes?"

"He's got a point," Max added. "Not worth stressing over."

Sheila shot him a look. "You think I want to care?"

"Then don't," Asher said bluntly. "Seriously, stressing over a bunch of pampered idiots who don't deserve it? Tch—not worth it."

"Sheesh, no need to yell, ogre," Dylan said, faking a wince and rubbing his ears. Then, with a smirk, he leaned back. "But you know, my dear lovely Sheila here can't just ignore them. Leader duties and all. The academy wouldn't expect that from her."

His grin widened. "Now, if it were me? I'd just show those fools exactly why you're the strongest first-year and why you're the leader. Nothing shuts people up like undeniable dominance."

Sheila crossed her arms, exhaling through her nose. "Easier said than done," she muttered.

Dylan chuckled. "Come on, Princess, you telling me you can't?"

Sheila shot him a sharp look, but Asher cut in before she could respond. "Dylan's got a point, though," he said, rolling his shoulders. "Chris and his little fan club are all bark. You're already proving yourself just by being better. If they can't handle it, that's their problem."

Max nodded. "And if they keep running their mouths, we can just beat the respect into them during the exam."

Sheila raised an eyebrow. "You do realize we're supposed to be fighting demons in the exam, not each other, right?"

Max smirked. "Same difference. Some of these guys act like brainless beasts anyway."

Dylan burst out laughing, while Asher grinned. Even Charlotte, who had been stretching off to the side, let out an amused huff.

Sheila shook her head, though a small smile managed to slip through. "You guys are impossible."

"What?" Max said, throwing up his hands in mock surrender. "Even Liam agrees with me." He grinned, nodding toward Liam.

Liam, who had been silent the entire time, blinked at the sudden mention of his name. "They're not wrong," he admitted. "At the end of the day, do what you want. As long as you're capable, why should it matter what they think?"

Sheila mulled over his words for a moment before responding. "I guess you're right. It's better to do what feels right to me."

"Exactly... If you let what others say get to you, you'll just end up as ignorant as they are." Ariana chimed in, stepping closer to Sheila with a warm smile.

"Thanks, Ariana," Sheila replied after a brief silence, her expression softening.

"Ugh, enough with the heartwarming nonsense," Asher groaned, rolling his eyes. "Let's get to some sparring already."