

ShadowBound 248

Chapter 248: Questions And Answers

The students materialized in front of the cafeteria, their stomachs growling, mouths practically watering at the thought of food. As they took in their surroundings, Dylan was the first to notice something—or rather, someone—missing.

"Uh... guys? Either I'm going blind, or Liam isn't here," he said, glancing around.

"No, you're right. He's not," Max confirmed. "Should we look for him?"

"Tch, no need," Asher scoffed, already making his way toward the cafeteria. "It's Liam we're talking about. This isn't the first time he's pulled a disappearing act."

Sheila frowned slightly. "He does have a point... but Liam wasn't exactly in great shape after that exam. Should we be worried?" She paused, then sighed. "Then again, it is Liam."

"Exactly," Dylan said with a shrug, already marching toward the cafeteria. "No point overthinking it—right now, my only mission is to eat until I physically can't anymore." He chuckled, shaking his head. "Still, gotta admit... Liam's next-level sneaky. Who vanishes right after getting teleported? Pfft, what a guy."

Liam materialized in an entirely different location—the headmaster's office. Sunlight streamed through the tall windows, casting long shadows across the polished floor. Behind him stood a heavy wooden door, the main entrance. To the far corner of the room, another door hinted at a passage leading elsewhere. His gaze drifted forward, taking in the meticulously arranged desk—neatly stacked papers, an ink bottle, and a quill resting in place. The chair behind it, however, was turned away, facing the glass windows rather than him.

Liam swept his eyes across the room, cataloging every detail—the towering bookshelves, the tomes lined in perfect order.

'Looks like an office... but whose? I haven't been here before,' he mused. 'And judging by the silence, I'm the only one who got sent here.'

His thoughts were interrupted by a calm yet commanding voice.

"Have a seat, Liam Hunter."

Liam didn't need to turn to recognize who it belonged to—Thion. Even so, he remained where he stood, his expression unreadable. "Apologies, Headmaster, but may I ask why I'm here?" His voice was steady, though exhaustion lingered in his posture.

Thion's tone didn't shift. "Still on guard, even in your current state. A good habit," he mused. Then, the chair slowly swiveled around, revealing him seated in it, hands resting atop the desk. "But it would be wiser to sit. Given your condition, I doubt you'll enjoy standing through this entire conversation."

Liam hesitated for a moment. 'If I'm right... based on what Sir Regulus hinted at earlier, he's about to ask how I stayed in the simulation after 'dying.'" He exhaled softly, stepping forward and lowering himself into the chair.

'Guess I'd better choose my words carefully.'

With a snap of Thion's fingers, a glass of water materialized in front of him. "Water?"

Liam barely spared it a glance. "Thanks, but I'll pass."

Thion nodded, unfazed. "Suit yourself. I'll leave it there in case you change your mind." He leaned forward slightly, his voice dipping lower. "Before we begin, I want you to think carefully about every answer you give me. And I'd advise against lying—or even considering it. Because I will know."

His piercing gaze locked onto Liam. "You do understand how serious this is, don't you?"

Liam met his stare and gave a slow nod. Well, just my luck. But no problem, after all, I, myself, don't know how this happened.'

Thion held Liam's gaze for a moment longer before exhaling quietly through his nose, his expression unreadable. His fingers tapped idly against the polished desk before he finally spoke.

"You remained conscious in the simulation after your recorded death," he said, his tone even. "Explain."

Liam leaned back slightly, maintaining an air of ease despite the weight behind the question. "Honestly? I don't know," he said. "One moment, I was stabbed through the heart, and everything went black. The next, I was looking at the sky."

Thion's eyes narrowed slightly, but he remained silent..

"I assumed it was some kind of delay in the system when I woke up. Maybe a glitch," Liam continued.

Thion finally cut in, his voice edged with skepticism. "If that was truly your belief, then why did you immediately rush to rescue Sheila, who was moments away from being slaughtered—just like Chris?" His gaze sharpened. "Moreover, your actions after your supposed 'revival' did not reflect someone who was clueless or disoriented."

Liam met Thion's stare without flinching. "Sir, to answer your questions, I'll start with this," he said evenly. "The ability to seize an opportunity without overthinking, to act instinctively rather than dwell on the unknown, is a trait drilled into me by my Tactical Espionage instructors—Lady Seraphina Vale and Sir Veylan Kaine." His tone was composed, neither too relaxed nor overly rigid.

Silence settled between them. The weight of the conversation pressed down like an invisible force, testing Liam's ability to hold his composure.

Then, finally, Thion spoke. "That's a valid point," he admitted. "But I still think there's more to this than you're letting on."

He leaned forward slightly. "Tell me, how many times have you come close to death in this world of ours?"

Liam suppressed the urge to sigh. 'How irritating. No matter how I answer, he'll do a background check, and that could uncover things I'd rather keep buried.'

After a brief pause, he answered, "Twice. Both times under the academy's watch."

Thion's brows furrowed slightly. 'Under our watch? What does he mean by that?'

"Specify"

"The first was during the entrance exam, when a dragon appeared in the beast realm," Liam replied.

"The second was during the three days in Vlardia, when I faced an advanced-class demon—a Malgath."

Thion's expression remained unreadable, but his thoughts churned. 'I remember both incidents... but can just two brushes with death truly make a fifteen-year-old understand what dying actually feels like?' His fingers pressed together in thought. 'Or... am I overthinking something that will never happen again?'

A faint scoff escaped him, barely audible. 'Perhaps Mystica is right. Maybe something malfunctioned, and his persistence in the simulation was just sheer luck.'

"I see," Thion finally said, his voice returning to its usual calm. "Apologies for the interrogation, Liam. This was something beyond your control."

"There's no need to apologize, sir," Liam replied smoothly.

Thion exhaled through his nose, nodding slightly. "I hope so."

Liam took that as his cue and stood. "If that's all, may I leave now?"

"Yes, but before you go, I have one last question." Thion leaned forward slightly. "Why did you save Sheila? I understand she's a friend, but you had other options. You could have retreated to safety or taken a different approach. Yet you chose to stand your ground, to pull a wounded comrade to his feet and fight beside him."

Liam's expression remained unreadable. Then, in a calm, measured tone, he spoke.

"As a knight, you either win the battle or die trying." His voice carried the weight of ingrained doctrine. "That is something I learned from my Knight Combat instructors. Saving Sheila was not a choice—it was a necessity. After all, in the aftermath of war, a leader is needed to give hope to those who remain, to show them they can still move forward."

Thion studied him carefully before nodding. "Well said. But tell me, Liam—don't you believe you could be a leader yourself?"

"No, sir."

"And why is that?"

"Because I lack the qualities of a leader, sir."

Thion's gaze didn't waver. "And what if I see those qualities in you?"

Liam met his eyes without hesitation. "Then, sir, I'd kindly ask you to look again."

Thion held Liam's gaze for a long moment, his piercing eyes searching for something beneath the boy's calm exterior. Finally, he let out a small chuckle—not of amusement, but of intrigue.

"You're an interesting one, Liam Hunter," Thion said, leaning back into his chair. "Very well. You may go."

Liam nodded, turning toward the door without another word. As his hand touched the handle, Thion's voice rang out once more.

"But mark my words, Liam," the headmaster said, his tone layered with meaning. "Whether you see it or not, whether you accept it or not, leadership isn't something you choose—it's something that chooses you."

Pushing the door open and stepping out, Liam didn't look back as he started walking the direction of the cafeteria.

"'Leadership chooses you?' he said." Liam muttered under his voice.

"Chains do the same."