

ShadowBound 249

Chapter 249: Chatter

Inside the cafeteria, the air was thick with the scent of freshly cooked meals—roasted meats, steaming soups, buttery bread, and an assortment of sweets lined up on the buffet tables. The students wasted no time diving in, grabbing trays and piling on as much food as possible.

Dylan, true to his word, stacked his plate with an ungodly amount of food, his grin wide as he admired his feast. "This... this is what victory tastes like," he declared dramatically before shoving a massive bite of steak into his mouth.

"Victory?" Charlotte scoffed, gracefully picking at her food. "You mean gluttony?"

"Same thing," Dylan said through a mouthful, completely unbothered.

Ariana, seated across from them, was eating at a more reasonable pace, but her gaze occasionally flickered toward the empty seat where Liam should have been. 'Where did he even go? It is one thing for him to disappear during regular moments, but after that kind of battle? I don't think he should be wandering off like that.'

Sheila, sitting next to her, seemed to pick up on her thoughts. "You keep looking at that seat like Liam's gonna pop out of thin air," she commented, casually biting into an apple. "Relax. If something was wrong, we'd know by now."

Ariana sighed, stirring her soup. "I know... it's just—"

Before she could finish, Max cut in. "Speaking of wrong things, let's talk about Asher and that little stunt you pulled against the Berserker." He pointed his spoon at Asher. "I swear, you and Liam were out there looking like lunatics trying to one-up each other in a 'who can die more recklessly' contest."

Dylan snorted. "Yeah, real talk, that fight looked like the battlefield version of two meatheads competing over who can lift heavier."

Asher smirked. "And?"

Max groaned. "And you're both insane."

Charlotte leaned back in her chair, her lips curling into a small, amused smile. "It was impressive, though. Not you, of course. But my dear Liam, he never ceases to amaze me."

Before Asher could respond to the teasing, Sheila's voice cut through the chatter, softer than usual. "Hey, Asher?"

He raised an eyebrow, caught off guard by the tone of her voice. "What? Don't tell me you're trying to stop me—"

"That's not it," Sheila interrupted, her voice carrying a strange weight. She met his gaze, her expression unreadable for a moment before she spoke again. "How did it feel, fighting alongside... you know, Liam?"

The table went silent.

Ariana, Charlotte, Dylan, and Max all exchanged glances.

Asher scoffed, breaking the silence with a short laugh. "Pfft. What kind of question is that? You're asking me like you were on the battlefield with us—me, Liam, and Chris." He waved his hand dismissively, clearly not understanding the gravity of the question. "And just so you know, he fought alongside me. Get the difference."

"I know, but seeing you and Liam fighting together was... intriguing to me," Sheila said, her voice soft yet curious.

Asher blinked, a smirk forming on his lips. "Huh? Wait, don't tell me you're jealous. Are you?"

"J-Jealous? What? No!" Sheila stammered, a faint blush creeping up her neck. "I'm just asking a simple question."

Asher chuckled. "Pfft, sure. If you're not jealous, then stop asking those questions." He leaned in with a playful glint in his eyes. "And if anyone here needs to talk about teamwork, it's you. You and Chris pulled off some insane moves together before that demon went berserk."

"Oh, I just remembered," Dylan chimed in, grinning mischievously. "I saw you two up on the screens. Let me tell you, that was... disturbing." He made a face, mock disgust dripping from his words. "Seeing you two in action? Yuck, ugh."

Sheila rolled her eyes but couldn't suppress a small smile. "Don't mind him, Sheila. You two were actually a great team... surprisingly," Ariana said, her tone warm and sincere.

"Yeah, I guess it was. It never would've happened if Chris hadn't decided to trust me as a leader, even if it was just for a few moments," Sheila admitted.

Dylan, never one to stay silent for long, interrupted with a grin. "Well, if you ask me, Chris is the real MVP of this whole exam. I mean, he saved Ariana and me from dealing with too many horrors, and then he saved you two ego-maniacs who still can't say 'thanks,'" he said, pointing at Max and Charlotte with a mocking smirk.

Max raised an eyebrow but stayed quiet, while Charlotte gave Dylan a playfully annoyed look.

Dylan continued, unabashed. "Then he swallowed his pride and teamed up with people he clearly can't stand. No one saw that coming. Honestly, he did stuff no one expected from him." He shrugged and took another bite, clearly satisfied with his own commentary.

Before anyone could respond, Liam appeared with a tray of food, looking as exhausted as the last time they saw him.

"Hey," he said, his voice drawing everyone's attention immediately.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the ladies' man," Dylan remarked through a mouthful of food, his grin wide. "You sure know how to make the ladies miss you more than they appreciate us."

"Sorry if I made anyone worry," Liam replied, settling into the empty seat next to Max. "Had something I needed to take care of."

"Of course you did. Defeating a Berserker demon wasn't enough of a challenge, huh? Had to go show off that you can still move better than I can," Asher teased.

Liam raised an eyebrow. "I'd tell you, but now that you've spoken, I'm not so sure I want to anymore."

"Hold up, hold up! Hey, meathead, zip it," Dylan interjected, nearly choking on his food. "Liam, of all people, just offered to tell us something he might never say again, and you want to shut it down with your nonsense? Don't let a one-in-a-million chance slip by!" He said, his expression comically serious.

The group burst into laughter at Dylan's dramatic reaction, and the conversation quickly shifted back to casual chatter about the events of the exam. They laughed, shared stories, and teased each other. Time passed without anyone noticing, and before long, the sun began to set, the noise around them gradually quieting as dusk settled in.

By the time the moon climbed high in the sky, the cafeteria was empty, and the students had made their way to their dorms. It had been a long, grueling day, but they had earned their rest. The hellish simulation was over, and it was time to sleep.