

ShadowBound 80

Chapter 80: All Alone

Ariana's back pressed firmly against the bookshelf, her discomfort palpable as Chris leaned in closer. His left hand rested just above her head, pinning her in place.

His piercing green eyes bore into hers with a smug grin plastered across his face, his voice dripping with mockery and flirtation.

"Well, well, looks like the little apprentice is all alone," Chris said, his tone a mix of condescension and amusement.

"You know, Ariana, you should really stick with someone stronger. Hanging around with losers like Liam doesn't suit you."

Ariana clenched her fists at her sides, doing her best to keep her composure. She knew speaking back would only make things worse, especially with Lucian and Logan hovering nearby, their presence like vultures waiting to pounce.

"Just leave me alone, Chris," she said, her voice steady but laced with tension.

Chris chuckled, leaning in just a fraction closer, his grin widening. "Now why would I do that? You're far too interesting to ignore. Besides..."

He ran a finger along the spine of a book beside her, drawing out his words. "...I think you'd look much better standing next to someone like me, don't you think? A prince deserves someone... worthy."

Ariana stiffened, her cheeks flushing—not from embarrassment, but from frustration and a growing sense of helplessness. She glanced around desperately, but the library was empty save for them.

Just as Chris leaned in closer, about to say something more, the sound of loud, clumsy footsteps echoed through the library, followed by a familiar voice.

"Liaaaaam! Yo, where you at, man?!" Dylan's voice rang out, carrying an obnoxious edge as usual.

From another aisle, Asher appeared, looking mildly irritated. "I told you not to yell in the library, you idiot."

"Oh, come on, it's not like anyone's studying here anyway!" Dylan replied, holding up a half-eaten myst cake in one hand while balancing three more in the other. "Besides, these myst cakes are delicious! You sure you don't want one?"

Asher gave him a side-eye. "I'd rather not choke on crumbs while trying to breathe, thanks."

They turned the corner and froze, taking in the scene before them. Chris and his lackeys stood around Ariana, who looked visibly distressed, and Chris had her cornered against the shelf.

Dylan, still mid-bite, blinked at the awkward scene. He swallowed loudly. "Whoa, what's this? Some kind of romantic drama? And no one invited me? Rude."

Asher sighed, rubbing his temple. "Of course you'd think this is entertainment." He placed his hands in his pockets, his eyes locking onto Chris. "Hey, Prince Charming, mind stepping away from her before I have to ruin your day?"

Chris turned, his expression twisting into annoyance at the interruption. "And what's it to you, Asher? This doesn't concern you."

"Doesn't concern me?" Asher raised an eyebrow, his lips curving into a cocky grin. "See, the thing is, I don't like bullies, and I really don't like wannabe princes pretending they own the place."

Dylan stepped forward, casually biting into another myst cake as crumbs spilled onto the floor. "And let's be real, Chris—you've got the whole 'bad guy from a cheap romance novel' vibe going on. Leaning over the poor girl? Hand on the shelf? Classic cliché. I mean, at least try something original."

Lucian scowled. "Watch your mouth, joker."

Dylan held up his hands, the cakes still in his grasp. "Whoa, relax, big guy. No need to get all defensive. I'm just saying, if you're gonna act like a villain, at least do it with style."

Chris growled, clearly losing patience. "Why don't you two leave before this gets messy?"

Asher cracked his knuckles, stepping in front of Ariana protectively. "Oh, I was hoping you'd say that."

Dylan grinned mischievously, shoving the last bite of his cake into his mouth. "Same here. I was starting to get bored."

Chris glared at Asher and Dylan, his frustration evident as the tension between the groups reached its peak.

He seemed ready to snap when the sound of a group of students entering the library broke the moment. Their casual chatter and laughter disrupted the tense silence, making Chris's jaw tighten further.

"Perfect timing," Dylan quipped with a smirk, gesturing toward the newcomers. "Now you can save face and walk away without looking like a total loser."

Chris sneered but quickly composed himself. "Tch. Whatever. Let's go," he barked, turning on his heel. Lucian and Logan exchanged glances before reluctantly following their leader.

As he passed by Asher, Chris muttered under his breath, "This isn't over."

"Oh, I hope not," Asher shot back with a smirk. "You're too much fun to deal with."

Chris stormed out of the library, his lackeys trailing behind him like obedient shadows.

As soon as they were gone, Ariana let out a shaky breath, visibly relieved. Before she could say anything, Dylan clapped his hands together, crumbs from his myst cakes scattering onto the floor.

"Well, that was dramatic! Seriously, Ariana, you could've just screamed 'Help, handsome guys required!' and we'd have shown up sooner."

Ariana blinked at him, half-amused, half-exasperated. "Thank you, Dylan. Truly."

Dylan grinned, his chest puffing out in exaggerated pride. "No need to thank me. I mean, I was the MVP here."

Asher rolled his eyes. "MVP? All you did was eat and throw out bad one-liners."

"Hey, my presence is a morale boost!" Dylan countered, grinning as he popped another cake into his mouth.

Ariana shook her head, unable to hold back a small smile. "Thank you both, really. I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't shown up."

"Don't sweat it," Asher said, his expression softening slightly. "Chris is just a jerk. You don't deserve to be cornered like that."

Dylan waved her off dramatically. "Yeah, yeah, no biggie. But hey, speaking of Liam... Where is that guy? Wasn't he supposed to be here?"

"Oh," Ariana said, her expression shifting slightly. "He just left a few minutes before you arrived."

Dylan froze mid-chew, then threw his hands up in mock outrage. "Are you kidding me? Liam just ditched you with those goons around? What a great friend! Real chivalrous of him."

Asher folded his arms, his tone more critical. "Honestly, that's cold, even for that Wannabe. He should've known better."

"Right?!" Dylan said, turning to Ariana with an exaggerated gasp. "You poor soul! Betrayed by the so-called 'Number 8'! I mean, I could never leave a damsel in distress."

Ariana tried to interject, raising her hands. "It's not like that! Liam didn't know—"

But the duo was too immersed in their playful judgments to listen.

"I bet he didn't even look back," Asher said dryly. "Just walked out like, 'Not my problem.' Typical."

"Exactly!" Dylan added. "I can see it now—his stoic face, his dramatic cloak swooshing behind him, disappearing into the sunset while Ariana's over here like, 'Oh nooo, help!'"

Ariana sighed, giving up on trying to stop them, and instead buried her face in her hands. But as their banter continued, her thoughts began to drift.

'Liam left because he didn't care?' she wondered. 'No... That's not it. He just... doesn't want to get involved. He's always so distant, like he's carrying some weight no one else can see.'

Her mind replayed the moment Liam had threatened Lucian, his cold, unwavering gaze and the effortless way he'd summoned his dagger. It wasn't bravado; it was calm, controlled power.

'He didn't even hesitate,' she thought, her cheeks growing warm. 'He looked so... cool. Like nothing fazes him. How does someone stay that composed in front of people like Chris?'

The memory lingered, and before she realized it, her face was burning. She quickly grabbed a random book from the nearest shelf and held it in front of her face, pretending to read.

'Get it together, Ariana,' she scolded herself, though her heart wouldn't stop racing. 'It's not like I like him or anything. He's just... interesting. That's all.'

Behind the book, her thoughts swirled with a mixture of admiration, curiosity, and something she wasn't ready to admit even to herself.

Meanwhile, Dylan and Asher's voices droned on in the background, blissfully unaware of her inner turmoil.