

ShadowBound 81

Chapter 81: Mystica's Training Ground

As the final bell rang, signaling the end of the regular lessons, the hallways buzzed with the usual chatter of students heading to their respective instructors for specialized training. Liam stepped out of the classroom, trying to find his way to where Mystica is.

As he walked down the corridor, the faint sound of hurried footsteps reached his ears, followed by a familiar voice calling out, "Liam! Hey, wait up!"

Liam paused mid-step, turning his head slightly. Sure enough, Dylan was jogging toward him, waving with one hand while clutching a half-eaten myst cake in the other.

Beside him, Asher strode with his usual air of confidence, his eyes locked onto Liam.

As Liam stood in the hallway, Dylan finally came to a stop in front of him, dramatically clutching his chest as if he'd just run a marathon. "Finally! The man, the myth, the abandoner of damsels in distress!"

Liam raised an eyebrow, his expression unchanging. "What are you talking about, Dylan?"

"Oh, don't play dumb!" Dylan exclaimed, pointing the remnants of his myst cake at Liam like it was a gavel.

"How could you leave poor, sweet Ariana all alone in the library, surrounded by those neanderthals? She could've been eaten alive!"

Asher stepped forward, his voice rising with theatrical seriousness. "Do you even care about basic chivalry, Liam? You left her to fend for herself against Chris and his lackeys! That's like throwing a mouse into a den of snakes!"

Dylan gasped, his hand over his mouth. "A mouse in a den of snakes! Asher, that was poetic!"

"Don't sidetrack me!" Asher snapped, now jabbing a finger at Liam. "Explain yourself!"

Liam sighed, clearly unimpressed with their antics. "Sorry."

Both Dylan and Asher froze mid-gesture, blinking at him in shock.

"Wait. Did he just...?" Dylan tilted his head, his jaw slightly dropping.

"He apologized?" Asher added, his voice quiet with disbelief.

Hands still in his pockets, Liam's tone was still indifferent. "I said sorry. Are you done now?"

Dylan immediately perked up, a grin spreading across his face. "Well, I'll be! I guess even Liam has a heart buried under all that indifference!"

Asher, however, wasn't ready to let it go. "Wait a second. That apology didn't feel genuine. I mean, look at his face! That's not the face of regret!"

"Let it go, man," Dylan said with a wave of his hand. "The important thing is that he said the words. Baby steps."

Asher grumbled but didn't push further.

"So, where are you headed, Mr. 'Sorry'?" Dylan asked, popping the last of his myst cake into his mouth.

"I'm trying to find Mystica's training grounds," Liam replied, his voice calm as always.

Dylan's face immediately lit up with a mischievous smirk. "Oh, buddy, you're not gonna find that around school."

Liam's brow furrowed slightly. "What do you mean?"

"Mystica doesn't do the whole 'official training grounds' thing," Dylan explained, leaning in conspiratorially.

"She likes secret places, the kind where you might stumble upon a magical portal or a sparkly unicorn, if you're lucky."

"Unicorn?" Liam deadpanned.

"Okay, maybe not a unicorn," Dylan admitted, grinning. "But seriously, she's eccentric. You'll need a guide."

Asher crossed his arms, watching Dylan suspiciously. "And you just happen to know where she is?"

"Of course I do," Dylan said proudly. "We're going to the same instructor, after all. Well, me and Liam, anyway. You're going back to Galen."

Dylan turned to Asher with a faux-pitying look, his voice dripping with mock sympathy. "Poor, poor Asher. Stuck training with Galen and missing out on the brilliant creations of the heavens."

Liam blinked. "Brilliant creations of the heavens?"

"He means Mystica," Asher said flatly, glaring at Dylan.

Dylan nodded enthusiastically, wagging his eyebrows. "Oh, Mystica. A divine vision in black, a true enchantress—"

"Stop talking," Asher growled, clearly annoyed.

But Dylan wasn't done. "You know, it must be tragic for you, Asher, always training with Galen and never getting to bask in Mystica's presence. Meanwhile, Liam and I are heading straight for paradise!"

"Par—" Liam started, but Dylan clapped a hand on his shoulder, cutting him off.

"Don't question it, Liam. Just go with it," Dylan said with a mischievous grin before turning back to Asher.

"I'm happy to trade places if you'd like," Asher snapped, his tone biting.

"Oh, no, no, no," Dylan said, waving his hand. "We can't deny Galen the pleasure of your delightful company. He'd be heartbroken!"

Before Asher could retort, Dylan threw an arm around Liam's shoulder, steering him down the hallway. "Come on, Liam! We've got a secret lair to find and a goddess to train under!"

Asher pinched the bridge of his nose, muttering under his breath before following the pair. Dylan's grin only widened, his laughter echoing through the hall as Liam quietly accepted his fate.

The sound of Asher's retreating footsteps echoed faintly as Liam and Dylan continued down the corridor.

The chatter of students outside faded into silence, leaving just the soft scuff of their boots on the smooth floor. Dylan seemed unusually quiet, munching the last of his myst cake as they walked.

Suddenly, Dylan halted in front of a blank stone wall. He smirked as he turned to Liam, a glint of mischief in his eyes. "We've arrived," he declared dramatically, gesturing at the seemingly unremarkable surface.

Liam raised an eyebrow. "You've brought me to a wall."

"Ah, ye of little faith." Dylan stepped forward, placing both hands on the wall. He closed his eyes for a moment, muttering something incomprehensible under his breath.

Slowly, the wall began to rumble, its edges shifting and grinding as if the stones themselves were alive.

Liam watched silently as a passageway formed where the wall once stood, the stones folding inward to reveal a dark pathway lined with faintly glowing green veins, like roots coursing with myst energy.

"See?" Dylan grinned, stepping aside to admire his work. "The secret lair of Mystica. Only a few privileged souls know the way."

"Or you just like showing off," Liam said dryly, stepping through the newly revealed entrance.

"Both can be true," Dylan quipped, following Liam inside.

As soon as they entered, the wall shifted back into place with a dull thud, sealing them in. The air grew cooler, the soft green glow casting eerie patterns on the stone walls.

The pathway twisted and turned, but Dylan led the way with unshakable confidence, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure Liam was keeping up.

After a few minutes, a faint light appeared ahead. Dylan's pace quickened, and he turned to Liam with an excited grin. "Come on! You're gonna love this."

The light grew brighter with every step until they emerged from the narrow corridor into a breathtaking clearing.

The training ground wasn't what Liam had expected. Instead of the grand, arcane structures he'd imagined for a mage like Mystica, the area was an open, serene forest.

Sunlight filtered through a canopy of vibrant green leaves, creating patches of warm gold on the grassy ground. In the center of the clearing, a small, crystal-clear pond reflected the sky, its surface rippling slightly as if alive with myst.

Around the edges were tall, twisting trees, their bark glowing faintly as if imbued with some dormant energy.

Dylan spread his arms wide and turned in a slow circle. "Ta-da! The hidden wonder of Mystica's training ground. No big deal." He turned back to Liam, grinning. "And now, I'm not the only guy here! Finally, some balance!"

Liam ignored Dylan's gloating and let his eyes wander. The place had an unusual calm, the kind of tranquility that made it hard to believe any intense training could take place here.

Before he could respond, a tired voice called out. "You're late again, Dylan."

Liam turned to see Ariana sitting on a rock near the pond, her auburn hair illuminated by the sunlight. She looked weary, as if she'd been waiting for hours.

Dylan clutched his chest dramatically. "Oh, Ariana, how could you accuse me of such a thing? I was delayed by the noble quest of escorting this lost soul to paradise." He gestured grandly to Liam.

Ariana rolled her eyes, clearly unimpressed. "Some noble quest."

Her gaze shifted to Liam, and her heart immediately skipped a beat. The memory of yesterday in the library flashed in her mind—the calm yet commanding way Liam had handled the situation, and the way he caught her.

Her cheeks burned red, and she quickly lowered her head, pretending to fidget with the hem of her sleeve.

"Uh... H-hi, Liam," she stammered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Liam glanced at her briefly, his tone casual. "Hey."

The indifference in his response only made Ariana more flustered. She quickly grabbed a book from her bag and held it up to hide her face, silently scolding herself.

'Get a grip, Ariana! He's just another trainee. No need to act like a comrade with a crush... Even if he does have that cool, unbothered attitude... and those sharp eyes—STOP.'

Before the awkward silence could linger, another figure entered the clearing. Sheila stepped through the trees, her long white hair shimmering like silver threads in the dappled sunlight. She carried herself with regal grace, her eyes scanning the group.

Dylan waved at her nonchalantly. "Sheila! Welcome to the land of secrets. How's royalty treating you today?"

Sheila gave him a brief nod, ignoring his casual tone. Her gaze shifted to Liam, her expression hardening slightly.

The memory of their last encounter lingered in her mind—the aura he displayed. However, she kept her composure, her voice calm but clipped. "I didn't expect to see you here."

Liam met her gaze without flinching, his face unreadable. "Same."

Sheila's lips pressed into a thin line, but she said nothing more, turning her attention to the pond instead.

Dylan, ever the instigator, leaned closer to Liam and whispered loudly, "Looks like you going to enjoy this place with Sheila around"

Liam sighed, already regretting letting Dylan lead the way.