

ShadowBound 138

Chapter 138: The Upcoming Exams

Liam let out a low sigh, his breath visible in the cool night air as he tilted his head back to gaze at the moon. Its pale glow bathed the empty colosseum in silver light, casting long shadows that danced around him. He lowered his eyes to Nyxie, still curled up nearby, her glowing eyes fixed intently on him.

"The last dragon of her kind, huh," Liam muttered to himself, his voice barely audible. His thoughts drifted to the folk tales he had heard as a child. Dragons—beings of unmatched intelligence, wisdom, and strength. They weren't just mythical creatures; they were symbols of balance and raw magical power.

At this point, Liam knew dragons weren't mere stories. Nyxie had proven that. Her actions, her instincts—they all pointed to an intelligence far greater than any ordinary magical beast.

'She's already shown how smart she is,' Liam mused, his crimson eyes narrowing thoughtfully. 'But I wonder... can she speak?'

The idea intrigued him. If Nyxie could talk, she might hold answers he desperately needed—answers about magic, about Myst, and perhaps even about himself. Magical beasts were naturally attuned to Myst, far more so than humans. It wasn't far-fetched to think she might know things no one else could explain.

His thoughts shifted, and an unfamiliar exhaustion settled over him. 'That conversation with Mystica must've drained me. I'll skip tonight's training and make it up tomorrow... but before that...'

"Hey, Nyxie," Liam called softly. The dragon lifted her head, her glowing eyes locking onto him. "How well do you understand me? Blink twice if you understand everything I say. If you only understand a little—"

Before he could finish, Nyxie blinked twice in quick succession.

Liam blinked, caught off guard. "Well... that's unexpected," he murmured. A small smile crept onto his lips.

'This is good,' he thought. 'If she can understand me this well, maybe there's a chance she'll learn to speak. But that probably depends on me. If Nyxie grows in tandem with my strength, like Mystica said, then I need to get stronger. She won't reach her full potential until I do.'

The realization sparked a new determination in him. "Now I have one more reason to get stronger as quickly as possible," Liam said, his voice laced with quiet resolve.

He glanced at Nyxie and gave her a small nod. "Goodnight, Nyxie." He raised his hand, preparing to dismiss her back into his Void, but paused as a new idea struck him.

"Wait... Shadow Solidification: Transforge."

Extending his left hand toward Nyxie, Liam channeled his Myst, watching as her large form began to shrink. Unlike her earlier transformations, this wasn't for combat. Nyxie's size reduced steadily until she resembled a cat—still a dragon, but now a tiny, winged shadowy version.

Nyxie, seemingly aware of her new size, took to the air, circling Liam excitedly before landing on his shoulder. Her small claws gripped his shirt as she nestled there, her warm presence oddly comforting.

Liam chuckled softly, reaching up to gently touch her shadowy scaled head. "It worked perfectly. Now you won't be a huge problem anymore."

Nyxie let out a soft rumble, almost like a purr, as Liam turned toward the colosseum's exit. "Alright, time to head back to the dorm," he said.

With Nyxie perched on his shoulder, Liam walked into the moonlit night, the faint sound of her wings fluttering occasionally as they made their way back to the dormitory.

The sun hung high in the sky, casting its golden light across the academy's training grounds. Students were scattered in pairs, engaged in their usual practice, wooden weapons clashing with determination—or, in some cases, sheer incompetence.

Magnus sat lazily on a nearby bench, absentmindedly nibbling on yet another cookie. He watched the students spar, a mixture of boredom and mild amusement on his face as he contemplated the meaning of life... or maybe just which flavor of cookie he'd have next.

Suddenly, with an exaggerated yawn, Magnus stood, raising his hand to interrupt the ongoing training.

"Alright, enough," he called out, his voice dripping with disinterest.

The students froze, glancing up at him in confusion. Some looked relieved, others were mid-swing and now awkwardly holding their weapons in midair.

"We're done for today," Magnus announced, stretching dramatically. "Everyone's looking a bit too... enthusiastic. You've had your fun." He tossed his cookie wrapper to the side and began walking toward the exit.

Max, wiping sweat off his brow, shot him a puzzled look. "Wait, what? We're done early?"

Magnus barely spared him a glance. "Yep, I've got important things to do. Like taking a nap. Or... y'know, contemplating my life choices."

The students exchanged uncertain glances. They were still processing the unexpected end to their training when Magnus, having almost reached the gate, turned back to face them.

"Oh, and before I forget," he added nonchalantly, "You're having exams next month."

The words hit like a thunderclap, causing a flurry of shocked reactions. Most of the students froze, wide-eyed.

"Exams?! We're supposed to have exams already?!" Dylan blurted, his voice pitched high in disbelief. "I thought we were just getting warmed up!"

"Wait—exams?!" A petite girl echoed, her face scrunched in confusion. "You can't be serious. We're barely into the first half of the semester!"

Sheila, who had been quietly practicing, blinked in surprise. "I—uh, didn't know about any exams..."

Magnus cocked an eyebrow. "You didn't know about the exams?" he asked, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Well, aren't you a bunch of bright little stars?"

Chris, looking equally confused shifted on his feet. "So... this isn't like a joke or something?"

Magnus sighed deeply, as if the world was weighing him down with its sheer stupidity. His shoulders slumped, and he glanced up as if asking the heavens for patience.

"Alright, listen up," he muttered, annoyed at having to explain things he assumed everyone knew. "The exams are just to help with the new ranking system. You know, how we figure out who's the top dog, and who's just... not. It's part of your first year in the academy. You've got about a month to actually, I don't know, learn something. So get your act together."

Max blinked a few times, clearly not expecting such a lack of enthusiasm from the head instructor. "Wait, that's it? You're just dropping that bomb and walking off?"

Magnus didn't even look back as he continued his lazy exit. "Yep, sounds about right."

"But when are the exams?" Dylan called after him, still unsure of whether this was some twisted joke.

Magnus waved a hand dismissively, still walking away. "You'll figure it out. You've got time. Stop wasting it with all this whining. You're in the academy for a reason, so start acting like it."

And just like that, he was gone, leaving a group of students still processing the fact that they'd just been told they had exams—soon—and none of them had the faintest idea what was about to hit them.

Asher glanced at Charlotte, who shrugged. "Guess we better start studying," she said, her tone light but with a hint of genuine concern.

"Yeah," Asher agreed, rubbing the back of his neck. "At least we know now, right?"

Max snorted. "More like we're all screwed. But hey, we'll figure it out. It's Magnus' way of making sure we don't slack off, I guess."

Dylan grinned, completely unfazed. "Eh, I'll be fine. It's just like another one of those 'let's see who can survive' tests, right?"

A chubby girl rolled her eyes. "Not all of us can be as casually confident as you, clown."

Ariana smiled nervously. "I'm sure we'll all do fine. Right?"

With that, the students quickly wrapped up their training. Some were too ecstatic about the early dismissal to think much about what Magnus had casually dropped on them—exams in a month. They chatted among themselves, teasing each other about how easy it would be, their wooden weapons now forgotten as they gathered their things.

Others, however, were more pensive, the words of their instructor still echoing in their minds. What kind of exams were these going to be? Just theory? Just practical? Or some hybrid nightmare where they had to memorize spells and execute them flawlessly under pressure?

Liam, walking quietly among them, could sense the mix of emotions swirling around.

"An exam to check how they are going to rank us?" he thought. His mind went back to the orientation, where Mystica had briefly mentioned that their rankings would change periodically based on performance. But they hadn't moved up or down since they'd arrived.

"Which means the rankings only change after an exam, I think," he continued, mulling over the possibility.

He glanced at the others—Dylan, with his usual carefree grin, probably already plotting how to turn the exams into some kind of joke; Sheila, who was definitely overthinking it; Max, already tuning out, probably just glad to not have to work that day. As for himself, though, Liam remained calm.

"There's no need to dwell on this too much," he thought, pushing open the door to his dorm room. "If there's going to be an exam, the other teachers would've said something. Maybe Magnus wasn't supposed to let it slip yet."

Liam shrugged off the nagging feeling in his gut. He had enough to deal with. Training, weaponry, his next moves. The exam would be just another challenge.