

ShadowBound 143

Chapter 143: The Announcement

Up on the stage, seated before the gathered students, were the academy's top instructors—figures of authority and respect like Sir Kaelen, Sir Regulus, Lady Ember, and other prominent individuals. Among them sat a man who immediately stood out, exuding an air of quiet authority. Though he appeared to be in his mid-fifties, his youthful features made him seem timeless.

He had impeccably permed white hair swept back, complemented by a meticulously groomed beard. His golden eyes radiated an unsettling calm, a tranquility so profound it felt almost unnatural. Everything about him—his posture, his aura, even the faint smile on his face—spoke of an unshakeable composure.

As the students shifted in their seats, awaiting the announcement, a man from the stage rose and approached the pulpit. His movements were fluid and deliberate, each step resonating with an aura of confidence. He was tall, with dark, wavy hair cascading around a face so finely sculpted it seemed almost unnatural. His nearly closed eyes gave him a perpetual air of serenity, but there was something unnerving about the perfect smile he wore—a warmth that felt just a touch too calculated.

Draped in a deep blue cloak intricately embroidered with gold, he looked every bit the noble mage. Reaching the pulpit, he gazed over the students with an expression that masked whatever lay beneath.

"I greet you all, dear first years," he began, his voice smooth and honeyed, with a charisma that demanded attention. "My name is Gordon Rvack." He let the name linger in the air for a moment, allowing it to sink in. "Many of you likely know me as the strongest mage of the Tempest Kingdom..." His tone was laced with self-assurance, bordering on vanity.

There was a pause as his eyes, almost imperceptibly, flickered open slightly, revealing dark blue irises that gleamed with something far less welcoming—disdain. Under his breath, barely audible, he murmured, "...while the rest of you commoners probably think I'm just another useless figure, like the rest of the things behind me."

It was spoken so softly, so quickly, that none of the students caught his words. But for those who had sharp vision, the faint flash of disgust in his eyes and the fleeting falter of his smile told a different story. Just as swiftly, his face returned to its perfect, smiling mask, as though the moment had never happened.

"Anyway," Gordon continued, his voice as smooth as before, "as you all know, we are here to provide you with important information regarding your upcoming exams. I trust you're all excited for that." His smile persisted, radiating charm but laced with an undertone of condescension.

"And so, without wasting much of your time, I present to you the Headmaster of our esteemed academy—Thion Layenhart." He gestured grandly toward the man with white hair and the golden eyes of earlier, stepping aside with a flourish.

Headmaster Thion rose gracefully from his seat, his calm demeanor unshaken as he approached the pulpit.

Headmaster Thion stood at the pulpit, his golden eyes scanning the sea of students with a calm yet commanding presence. His voice, steady and measured, carried through the hall with ease.

"Good evening, first-years. As headmaster, it is my responsibility to guide you toward the path of excellence, and part of that path includes moments like these—your exams. You've had three months to familiarize yourselves with our academy's expectations. Now, it is time to evaluate your progress."

The room was silent, the students hanging on to every word, their unease palpable.

"The first part of your exams," Thion began, his tone as calm as ever, "is the theory segment. This will assess your knowledge in four critical areas: magical theory, history, magical beasts, and, of course, demons. This exam will take place on the first day of the four-day testing period and is designed to challenge your comprehension and recall. It will span seven hours, and I expect every one of you to utilize your preparation time wisely."

A murmur swept through the hall at the mention of seven hours, but Thion's unwavering gaze silenced it immediately.

"The theory component will account for 30% of your total score," he continued. "While it is not the majority, do not underestimate its importance. A solid foundation in knowledge is as vital as the skills you display in combat."

He paused briefly, allowing his words to settle before transitioning to the more daunting aspect.

"The second part of your exams," Thion said, "is the practical assessment. This will take place in a realm specifically chosen for this purpose: Vlardia."

The mention of the realm piqued the students' curiosity, but Thion's serene demeanor remained unchanged.

"Vlardia is a place of dual significance. It serves as a testing ground for our academy and as a containment zone for captured demons. These demons, while sealed by powerful spells, will be temporarily released into designated zones to facilitate the practical examination."

Gasps and whispers rippled through the hall, but Thion pressed on, his tone steady and unbothered by the students' reactions.

"The practical assessment will be conducted in groups," he stated, eliciting a groan of discontent from several students. "I understand that some of you may find this arrangement less than ideal. However, teamwork is not optional—it is essential. Your ability to collaborate, make strategic decisions, and navigate danger will be the primary factors in determining your success."

Thion's gaze swept across the room. "Points will not be awarded based on individual prowess or how much you flaunt your abilities. This exercise is not about ego; it is about application. Misleading your teammates or acting recklessly will not earn you any favor. In fact, such behavior will cost your entire group points."

The gravity of his words began to sink in as he continued. "You will not be allowed to choose your teammates. This is deliberate. You must learn to adapt and perform regardless of the circumstances or people around you. However, let me make one thing very clear—if an individual in a group makes a mistake or violates the rules, the penalty will affect the entire team. I suggest you take this as a lesson in accountability."

Thion's voice remained calm, but his words grew sharper. "Now, I know some of you have been diligent, dedicating your time to rigorous training and study. But others..." His eyes seemed to glint with faint amusement. "Others have spent their days indulging in laziness. Eating, sleeping, and wasting precious time. To those individuals, let me say this: your complacency will not be tolerated."

The hall was silent, tension thick in the air. Thion's next words hit like a hammer.

"The passing mark for these exams is not 80%. It is not 70%. It is 90%. Anyone who falls below this threshold will be expelled immediately. It does not matter if five students fail or if 50 do. Those who cannot meet the standard have no place here."

The students' faces paled as the weight of his words sank in. Some exchanged nervous glances, while others sat frozen in their seats, their confidence eroding.

"Your time at this academy is a privilege, not a right," Thion concluded, his voice as calm as ever, yet each word carrying an undeniable finality. "Prove that you belong here. That is all."

His gaze lingered on the students for a moment, the calmness of his expression as unnerving as ever. Then, without another word, he stepped back from the pulpit.

Just as Headmaster Thion turned to leave the stage, a clear, feminine voice called out to him, halting his steps.

"Headmaster!"

Thion turned to see Sheila, standing up from her seat. The room grew quieter, and a few students looked on with curious expressions. Sheila's presence, as always, commanded attention, but Thion didn't flinch. His calm demeanor remained unshaken as he acknowledged her with a subtle nod.

Sheila stepped forward, her voice clear and respectful, but there was an edge of concern in her tone.

"Headmaster, if I may," she began, her eyes meeting his unwaveringly. "What if the demons... turn wild? What if things escalate and become too dangerous for the students?" Her words hung in the air, her concern evident. "Is it not too risky to throw students into a literal den of demons for their practical exams?"

Thion stood still, his eyes briefly flickering with the recognition of who stood before him. Sheila was no ordinary student; she was the princess of the Crescent Kingdom, a fact he knew well. However, her title and status didn't faze him. His gaze remained as steady as ever, unaffected by her royal lineage.

The hall fell into a heavy silence as all eyes turned toward the Headmaster. Sheila's question was valid, and many students likely shared her concern. Thion took a slow breath, allowing the tension to build before speaking.

"Princess Sheila," he said calmly, acknowledging her title but with no special emphasis, his voice unwavering. "Your concerns are valid, but let me assure you—this is a controlled environment." He paused for a moment, before continuing. "The demons in Vlardia are contained. While they may be released temporarily for the exams, they are not allowed to roam freely."

He let that thought sink in before continuing.

"If, by any chance, things were to get out of hand, there are fail-safes in place," Thion continued. "The academy has established a rapid-response protocol. Should the situation exceed acceptable boundaries, we will deploy the academy's Knights to restore order and ensure the safety of all involved. I can assure you, Princess, there is no cause for concern."

Thion's gaze softened just slightly as he looked directly at Sheila.

"The students will be safe. That is my responsibility, and I stand by it," he said, the certainty in his words leaving no room for doubt.

Sheila studied him for a moment longer, her blue eyes narrowing slightly, as if measuring his response. But after a few seconds, she gave a small nod, her concerns addressed, though she remained ever vigilant.

"Thank you, Headmaster," she said with a polite nod of her own, before returning to her seat.

Thion, satisfied that the matter had been settled, turned once again to leave the stage with Gordon trailing behind him.