

ShadowBound 151

Chapter 151: Sent To Vlardia

When the next day arrived, the atmosphere among the first years had shifted. Gone were the nervous whispers about the theory exam or the fear of expulsion. Today, some students looked as if they were ready to march into battle, their determination blazing. "If we're going down," one had declared loudly, "then we're going down in style!" Others, however, had resigned themselves to fate, their faces pale and expressions devoid of any fight.

At the Northeast side of the Academy stood a grand, high-domed structure, its design intricate and commanding. Morning sunlight filtered through its numerous windows, casting reflections across the exterior like fractured rainbows. The inside, however, was even more striking—a carefully designed blend of elegance and authority. A raised stage viewing balcony dominated the space, lined with rows of plush, red-cushioned seats. This place was reserved for the Academy's highest-ranking figures and influential guests.

At the forefront sat the Headmaster, Mr. Thion, his composed demeanor radiating authority as he observed the scene below. To his right was Gordon, wearing his signature overly sincere smile that seemed out of place among the stoic expressions surrounding him. Several other notable figures were present as well: Sir Regulus, Sir Kaelen, and Lady Ember. Mystica sat a few seats behind the Headmaster, her piercing eyes watching the proceedings with a mixture of amusement and curiosity.

Among the other attendees were nobles, knights, and mages, all present for reasons beyond mere academic interest. The presence of the nobles was more political than ceremonial; they were keen to observe the next generation of talent that might one day serve their interests. For them, this was not just an exam—it was an opportunity to identify potential allies or assets for their respective houses. The Academy's reputation as a breeding ground for powerful mages and warriors made it a critical hub for political maneuvering.

Yet, not everyone was present. In the back row, two seats remained conspicuously empty. They belonged to Galen and Magnus, the Academy's most infamous knights. Their absence drew murmurs among the nobles, who questioned the decorum—or lack thereof—of the knights tasked with shaping young minds.

"Such a lack of discipline," one noble muttered, leaning toward another. "How are we to trust knights who don't even bother showing up on time?"

But beneath their murmurs lay an unspoken truth: no one could deny the value these knights brought to the Academy and the Kingdom. Galen and Magnus were far more than just instructors; they were legends in their own right. Despite their differing temperaments and reputations, both were unparalleled in their mastery of their respective elements. While Magnus was revered for his precise and overwhelming wind magic, Galen's fire magic was so destructive that stories of his strength bordered on myth. Their presence at the Academy wasn't a question of propriety but of necessity; they were living examples of what the students could aspire to become.

Back on the tiled ground below the balcony, the first-year students gathered, their uniforms crisp and weapons at the ready. They formed a loose assembly, their chatter and shifting stances betraying a mix of anticipation and anxiety. The space, though open and unadorned, seemed almost sacred under the weight of so many expectant gazes.

A hush fell over the students as the Headmaster rose from his seat with a commanding presence, his sharp gaze sweeping across them. The murmurs that had filled the air below fell silent as every single one of them turned their attention upward, anticipation palpable. Clearing his throat, he began to speak, his voice resonating with authority.

"Good morning, first years. I trust you all enjoyed your experience with the theory exam yesterday." His tone carried a subtle edge, as if daring them to admit otherwise.

A ripple of nervous chuckles passed through the students, though it quickly faded as he continued.

"Today marks the beginning of your battlefield exam. For the next three days, you will be sent to Vlardia. Allow me to remind those of you who may have let the details slip your minds what Vlardia truly is and what you can expect."

The Headmaster clasped his hands behind his back, his expression growing more solemn. "Vlardia serves two purposes. It is both a testing ground for the Academy and a containment zone for captured demons. These demons, sealed by powerful enchantments, will be temporarily released into designated areas to provide the necessary conditions for your examination."

A visible wave of tension swept through the students, many of whom exchanged uneasy glances.

"Yes," the Headmaster confirmed. "This means that, depending on your circumstances, you may encounter these demons. Whether you find them—or they find you—will largely depend on your choices and instincts." He paused for effect, allowing the weight of his words to settle over them.

"However, let me make one thing abundantly clear: the purpose of this exam is not to see how many demons you can defeat. Your primary objective is survival. You are to demonstrate adaptability, strategic thinking, and the ability to navigate dangerous situations. Should you find yourself outmatched, retreat. Survival takes precedence over reckless bravery."

The students listened intently, their initial fear tempered by the clarity of his instructions.

"That being said," he added, his tone hardening, "do not think for a moment that you can simply hide and wait out the exam. Doing so will result in an automatic failure—zero points for the entirety of the exam. This test is about learning to thrive in adversity, not avoiding it."

Silence reigned as the weight of the Headmaster's words bore down on them. Some students straightened their postures, steeling themselves, while others shifted nervously.

"Any questions?" he asked, scanning the group with a sharp gaze. For a moment, none of the students moved, their silence speaking volumes.

Just as he turned to Mystica, preparing to proceed, a voice broke through the quiet. "Uh—sir!"

The Headmaster halted mid-step, his piercing gaze falling on a boy with messy ginger hair, his hand hesitantly raised.

"Yes, young man," the Headmaster said evenly. "Do you have a question?"

The boy swallowed, then nodded. "Yes, sir. I was wondering... you mentioned we would be placed in groups for this exam. When will we find out who our group members are?"

The Headmaster's stern expression softened slightly, acknowledging the merit of the question. "A fair query. The group placements have already been decided. You will learn who your teammates are upon your arrival in Vlardia."

"Thank you, sir," the boy replied, lowering his hand.

"Any further questions?" the Headmaster asked, his gaze sweeping the students once more. When none came, he nodded and turned back to Mystica. "Very well. Mystica, if you would."

Mystica, who had been reclining in her seat with a playful smirk, rose gracefully. "Understood, Headmaster." She stepped forward, addressing the students with a teasing lilt to her voice. "Alright, my darlings, it's time to enter the battlefield. Enjoy yourselves—and do try to come back in one piece."

With a snap of her fingers, the air shimmered with magic. One by one, the students began to dissolve into clouds of white, swirling smoke, their forms vanishing into the ether. Within moments, the tiled ground was empty, leaving only the faint scent of myst lingering in the air.

Mystica turned back to the Headmaster with a sly smile. "All set, Thion. Let's see how they fare."

The Headmaster nodded, his expression unreadable as he gazed at the empty space below. "Let the exam begin."

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Minutes after the students had been teleported, a door at the back of the balcony creaked open. The sharp sound drew the attention of many seated nobles and knights, but the atmosphere shifted entirely when two figures strode in: Galen and Magnus.

"I said shut up," Galen growled, his voice laced with irritation as he entered the room. He glanced over his shoulder, clearly annoyed. "If you wanted to walk through first, you should've just gone ahead, you idiot."

Magnus, strolling in behind him with his usual carefree demeanor, smirked. "Well, maybe next time you should just agree to walk behind me. Problem solved." He casually rubbed the back of his head, as if nursing a fresh smack.

The tension in the air was palpable as the two knights entered. Eyes turned their way, some filled with open disdain, while others betrayed grudging respect. The nobles, in particular, shifted uncomfortably at their irreverent presence.

The acting commander of the Academy's Knight's Council, Sir Varyn Hone, spoke from his seat with an air of authority, his no-nonsense expression unwavering. "At the very least, show some respect by offering a greeting or silence for arriving late."

Galen stopped mid-stride, his eyes locking onto the back of Sir Varyn's head. "Huh? Who exactly are you directing that statement to? I hope it's not me, Sir Varyn," he said, his tone dripping with mockery. "I don't take kindly to being told to act a certain way just to satisfy the fragile egos of nobles."

Without waiting for a response, Galen dropped into an empty seat, stretching his legs out as if he owned the place.

The tension snapped like a bowstring when Sir Kaelen stood abruptly, his chair scraping loudly against the floor. "MAGNA GALEN! HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO YOUR COMMANDER IN SUCH A DISRESPECTFUL MANNER!" His booming voice echoed through the chamber, silencing the murmurs.

Galen cracked one eye open, reclining further in his seat. "First off, don't say my name backward, you damn wizzel. Second,"—he propped one foot on the chair in front of him, folding his arms behind his head—"he's your commander, not mine."

The audacity of his words left several nobles gasping in shock, their outrage barely contained. Others simply muttered under their breath, clearly torn between anger and admiration for Galen's sheer disregard for decorum.

Beside him, Magnus finally sank into the seat next to his friend, a crooked smile tugging at his lips. "C'mon, Gally, you can't go around talking like that. You're going to give the poor man a heart attack." His teasing tone only added fuel to the fire.

"Don't call me that, you damn idiot," Galen snapped, his irritation evident.

Magnus chuckled, leaning back lazily. "Sure thing, Gally."