

ShadowBound 221

Chapter 221: Dead Ends

Deep beneath her chamber, in the depths of her private underground lab, Mystica stood before a sleek metallic examination platform, her gaze locked onto the unsettling form of Duchess Aveline's corpse.

For the past week, she had thrown herself into rigorous arcane analysis, alchemical tests, and mystic dissections, searching for the elusive key behind the demonic transformation. Yet, time and time again, she met the same frustrating conclusion—nothing. No leads, no revelations, no grand epiphany.

She leaned forward, arms crossed, eyes narrowing at the body as if sheer willpower alone could force the truth to reveal itself. But the answers refused to come.

Unlike her usual elegant, dark gowns, she now wore a practical white coat over a sleeveless top, exposing her shoulders. Her long, flowing black hair was twisted into a messy bun, and a pair of transparent glasses perched on her nose—because, apparently, even Primordials needed to see things up close.

With a deep sigh, she pushed away from the platform and collapsed into a nearby seat, head tilted back in exasperation.

"A whole week of relentless effort, and what do I have to show for it?" she grumbled. "Absolutely nothing. How utterly irritating."

She had tried everything.

First, the blood analysis. That had been her starting point, the most fundamental approach—because blood always told the truth. Yet, Aveline's veins had become an unsettling fusion of human and demon, a twisted alchemy of two incompatible essences. The dark ichor that now mingled with her human blood didn't behave like any known demonic corruption; it wasn't invasive like a curse, nor was it a forced mutation. It was something else entirely—something intrinsic.

Even stranger, when Mystica attempted to separate the two substances, they resisted. They didn't merge, nor did they repel each other. Instead, they coexisted, locked in some grotesque harmony. That

was not how she believed demonification should work. A human body should have either rejected or succumbed to the transformation completely. But Aveline had—impossibly—been stuck somewhere in between.

Then came the soul resonance tests. She had infused the body with trace amounts of Myst, attempting to detect the lingering echoes of Aveline's soul. If there had been any trace of her consciousness left—any residual will—Mystica would have found it. But the results had been maddeningly inconsistent. At times, there was something—a faint whisper, a flicker of awareness. Other times, nothing at all. As if Aveline's soul had been severed incompletely, leaving fragments behind like shattered glass.

She had even attempted a necrotic reconstruction spell, weaving time-bound magic to rewind the body's last moments before death. It was a dangerous, volatile spell—one she rarely used. Yet, when she cast it, the body violently rejected the process. The magic unraveled the moment it touched Aveline's remains, as if something within the corpse refused to be seen. That had never happened before. Not once.

"Blood that refuses to separate. A soul that lingers but won't speak. A body that defies time itself," Mystica muttered to herself. "What did you get yourself into, Duchess Aveline?"

Despite she voicing her complaints, she reached for the nearest glass of wine, taking a long, deliberate sip. Because if she was going to suffer through intellectual agony, she would at least do it with a drink in hand.

As Mystica closed her eyes, hoping to grant her overworked brain a moment's peace, the familiar creak of the lab door cut through the silence.

"Great. So much for that."

"Hey, you in here?" came Galen's voice, casual as ever.

"Yeah, back here," Mystica called back, not bothering to move from her seat.

Moments later, Galen strolled in, hands in his pockets, his eyes scanning the dimly lit chamber.

"Gotta say, it's surprising to see you practically living down here."

Mystica smirked, stretching her arms lazily. "I know, Gally, but with this whole new phenomenon, my brain's been running on overdrive."

"New phenomenon?" Galen raised an eyebrow.

"Yep. Take a look for yourself." Mystica gestured toward the metallic examination platform.

Following her lead, Galen turned his gaze toward the body—and immediately, his expression twitched. "The hell am I looking at?" he muttered, stepping closer.

"That..." Mystica stood, joining him beside the corpse. "That is a human halfway transformed into a Gaia demon."

Galen's eyes flickered between the grotesque, partially mutated features, his sharp mind quickly processing what he was seeing.

"Yeah, I can see that. I meant how is this even possible?"

Mystica let out a dramatic sigh, placing a hand on her hip. "That, love, is exactly what I've been trying to figure out for the past week. And let me tell you—dead ends, everywhere."

"Wow. Sounds like a real pain." Galen remarked, arms crossed.

Mystica let out a dramatic sigh. "Oh, Gally..." she murmured before suddenly falling backward.

Galen, moving purely on instinct, caught her with ease.

She wasted no time wrapping her arms around his neck, her violet eyes twinkling with mischief. "You have no idea."

Galen exhaled, unimpressed. "I mean, I do feel bad for you, but that whole dramatic fall? Completely unnecessary."

Mystica smirked, leaning in just slightly. "Oh, but for me, sweetie? Very necessary."

Galen narrowed his eyes but didn't push her off. "Right. Anyway, who is this?" He tilted his head toward the corpse. "Doesn't look like your average nobody."

Mystica blinked. "Wait... are you telling me you don't recognize her?"

Galen's expression remained blank. "Am I supposed to?"

A small laugh escaped Mystica. "Pfft—forgot how little you care about nobles and politics. My mistake for expecting otherwise, Gally."

Finally, she let go of him and stepped back, brushing off her coat. "This is Duchess Aveline Voreaux. One of the wealthiest nobles in Veridn—and a significant supporter of the Kingdom."

Galen glanced at the half-transformed body again, his eyes narrowing slightly. "Huh. Never heard of her."

Mystica chuckled, adjusting her glasses. "Not surprising. You only pay attention to people if they can fight or entertain you."

Galen smirked. "Pretty much. But now you've got me curious—what did she do to end up like this?"

Mystica folded her arms, her expression shifting to something more thoughtful. "Well, officially? She was executed for orchestrating a movement to overthrow other nobles in Veridn. But unofficially? The Queen discovered she was involved in human trafficking and—get this—every mysterious disappearance in her domain was somehow linked back to her."

Galen let out a low whistle. "Damn. That's dark, but I'm not really surprised, these bastards have always been like this."

"You are right on that one, but it gets worse," Mystica said, walking back to the platform and placing a gloved hand near the corpse. "She was executed. Dead. But right before her body was fully disposed of, it started transforming into this—part human, part Gaia demon."

Galen's relaxed posture stiffened slightly. "That's not supposed to happen."

"Exactly." Mystica nodded. "There are no records of a human spontaneously turning into a Gaia demon post-mortem. It's completely unnatural. Even with all my research, I haven't been able to determine why or how it happened."

Galen exhaled sharply, rubbing the back of his neck. "Well, shit. If you're stumped, that's saying something."

Mystica sighed, leaning against the table. "A whole week, Gally. No progress. It's like I'm missing a crucial piece of the puzzle."

Galen crossed his arms, his gaze locked onto the corpse. "So... what's your next move?"

Mystica smirked. "Simple. I'm going to push even deeper. If conventional methods won't work, it's time to take a more unconventional approach."

Galen raised an eyebrow. "That sounds ominous."

Mystica chuckled darkly. "Oh, it should."

"Well, since my brain isn't exactly wired for this kind of thing, I'll leave you to your noble service for our beloved Queen Lucy," Galen said, already turning toward the door.

Mystica clicked her tongue. "You just got here, and you're already leaving? That's rude." She removed her gloves and shrugged off her coat. "I'm coming with you. And I really hope you haven't taken a bath yet, because I'm in dire need of a nice, steamy couple's soak."

Galen paused at the doorway, glancing back with a deadpan expression. "We're not a couple."

Mystica smirked, sauntering up beside him. "Keep telling yourself that, darling."

As they ascended the staircase, Mystica casually stretched. "By the way, aren't the exams for the academy coming up soon? What do you think they'll throw at the kids this time? I'm betting it'll be the same as last year."

Galen exhaled sharply. "Probably. Not that I care, as long as they don't stick me with that pointless closing ceremony nonsense again."

Mystica chuckled. "Pfft, don't worry. I doubt Headmaster Thion would make that mistake twice."

She shut the door behind her as they stepped out of the lab, their footsteps echoing through the underground corridor.