

ShadowBound 39

Chapter 39: Enrollment Trial

"Welcome to the Dark Knight Academy," Galen began, his deep voice resonating across the courtyard.

The crowd of students remained silent, waiting for what would follow, the air tense with anticipation.

"I'm sure you're all wondering why you're standing here, baking under the hot sun," he continued, his eyes scanning the faces in front of him.

A murmur rippled through the crowd at his words. It was clear that many of the students were beginning to feel restless.

Galen, however, didn't let the unease settle for long. His next words cut through the growing whispers like a blade.

"The reason is simple," he said coldly.

"Unlike the usual procedure where you submit your enrollment forms and we skim through your so-called 'impressive' combat records, this year, the academy has decided to implement something different—a trial."

A stunned silence fell over the students. The idea of a trial hadn't even crossed their minds. This wasn't part of the standard academy entry process.

"Since when did that become a thing?" a boy in the crowd called out, his voice laced with frustration. His outburst seemed to embolden others, and soon, several voices rose in protest.

Galen's eyes narrowed, and with a wave of his hand, the noise ceased. His voice, cold and sharp, sliced through the air like a sword.

"If any of you have a problem with this, you're welcome to quit now and head home. Or perhaps try your luck at some other academy." His tone was blunt, leaving no room for negotiation.

The students fell into an uneasy silence. No one moved. Galen's words hung in the air, each one a challenge to their pride.

He continued, his gaze hard and unrelenting. "Some of you may have impressive things written on your enrollment forms, but in reality, many of you are nothing but overhyped, untested trash. And if you can't handle a simple trial, you've got no business being here."

The sharpness of his words caused some students to shift uncomfortably. His tone was dripping with disdain, and it was clear he had no patience for excuses.

"And just so you know," Galen added, his expression darkening, "The Noble Knight Academy—the one many of you consider a 'better' alternative—has also adopted a trial system this year. So if you think you'll find an easy way out there, think again. The only other academies that might take you are those that don't care about your skill—or your future."

Liam stood quietly, unfazed by Galen's harsh words, his focus unbroken. But beside him, Dylan leaned in, his voice a quiet, playful whisper. "Woah, looks like the old man's already pissed off about having to be here."

Liam didn't bother responding, his attention locked on Galen, waiting for the man's next words. Dylan, on the other hand, glanced around with a faint smirk, clearly amused by the tension that had settled over the group.

"Well," Galen said, his voice softer but no less intense, "since none of you have turned tail and left, I'll assume you're all ready and willing to take this trial. Good."

His eyes swept across the crowd once more, lingering on the faces of the students as if daring any of them to back out.

The courtyard was silent again, but this time it wasn't out of confusion—it was out of resolve. Every student standing there knew that this was no ordinary academy, and that no ordinary path lay ahead.

"Now, I'll elaborate on what the trial entails," Galen began, his voice commanding attention once more.

"You will all be sent to a location—a realm. The Realm of Beasts." His words sent a ripple of shock through the crowd. The students, already tense, began murmuring nervously.

"This trial will test your true skills, your survival instincts, and how long you can last in... unconventional situations," Galen continued, cutting through the rising noise. His eyes gleamed with a hint of amusement, sensing their unease.

One boy from the crowd, clearly agitated, shouted, "How are we supposed to get to this 'Realm of Beasts'? Are we supposed to take another train or something?"

Before Galen could respond, a new presence joined the platform. A tall, slender woman appeared, her arrival seemingly out of thin air. Her long, dark hair cascaded down her back, and her piercing purple eyes scanned the crowd with a playful glint.

She wore a nightshade-black gown, slit daringly along her left leg from her foot to her thigh, showing off her perfect, sculpted form.

The students stared in awe, and her seductive smile only heightened their reactions.

"That's where I come in, my little diamonds," she said, her voice soft, smooth, and laced with flirtation.

"I greet you all. I am Mystica Moonstone. Some of you might have heard of me." Her introduction was met with whispers and admiration.

Beside Liam, Dylan's reaction was... less subtle. His eyes widened, and he nearly stumbled over himself trying to get a better look.

"W-wait, am I dreaming? Is this real life?" he muttered to himself before leaning toward Liam, his face wearing a ridiculous expression that was somewhere between shock and elation.

"Bro. Bro!" Dylan whispered, elbowing Liam excitedly. "Do you see this?! She's like... like a goddess, man! Those thighs... that chest... I think I've just been reborn. Holy myst, I'm in love." His eyes glazed over as he continued muttering in awe, completely captivated by Mystica's appearance.

Liam glanced sideways at him, utterly unfazed by Dylan's behavior, then returned his attention to Mystica, ignoring his companion's over-the-top reaction. But Dylan wasn't done.

"I swear, I've never seen someone so..." He gestured helplessly at Mystica's figure, "...so perfect."

He clasped his hands dramatically, his voice low as he fantasized. "Maybe after this trial, I'll find a way to 'thank' her, if you know what I mean..."

Liam raised an eyebrow but said nothing. Dylan was clearly off in his own world, lost in his perverted daydreams.

Mystica, unaware of Dylan's antics—or perhaps choosing to ignore them—continued with a smile.

"I am the head mage assigned to this zone, and I'll be responsible for sending you to, and bringing you back from, the Realm of Beasts." She gave a playful wink, causing more murmurs and a few hushed gasps from the crowd.

"Grab your weapons and get ready," Galen barked, regaining control of the situation. His tone was stern, pulling everyone's focus back to the trial.

"And don't worry about dying. Mystica will cast a spell that will return you here the moment you're severely injured. So, in theory, you won't die—though I can't promise you won't wish you had."

The students exchanged uneasy glances but quickly complied, grabbing their weapons. Dylan, still recovering from his "revelation," patted his bow and whispered to himself, "Gotta make sure I impress her."

Liam observed the scene calmly, noticing how some students were still uncertain about what was coming.

But just as things seemed to settle, Galen spoke again. "Now, Mystica, do me a favor and send these wannabe knights on their way."

Mystica smiled once more, her eyes twinkling mischievously. She raised her hand and snapped her fingers. Instantly, one by one, the students began to disappear, each vanishing in a puff of smoke.

As the last of them disappeared, Mystica turned to Galen with a playful smirk. "You seem extra grumpy today, Galen." Her voice was teasing, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

Galen, who had been watching the students vanish with clear distaste, grunted in response. "The authorities, these kids... everything is just getting on my last nerve."

Mystica chuckled softly. "I get the part about the authorities, but the kids? What'd they do to deserve your wrath?"

"You wouldn't understand," Galen replied, his irritation palpable. "One of those idiots went in without a single weapon. I swear, this batch is bound to be full of failures."

Mystica's playful demeanor shifted slightly. "Wait... you're serious? Should I bring him back?"

Galen waved a hand dismissively. "No need. Let's see what these brats are made of. Maybe they'll surprise us. Probably not, but it might be entertaining to watch them fail."

Mystica's smile returned as she leaned against the edge of the platform. "You're such a softie, Galen."

Galen rolled his eyes. "Don't get cute. Just make sure your spell works. The last thing we need is a bunch of corpses because you were too busy showing off."

Mystica winked again, her voice dripping with mock innocence. "Oh, darling, my magic's flawless. It's not my fault if you've got no faith in them."

Galen huffed, turning his back to her, but even he couldn't hide the slight smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Whatever you say, Mystica. Let's just get this over with."