

ShadowBound 42

Chapter 42: The Nyxarion Dragon

Liam sat on a small boulder, his chest rising and falling as he caught his breath. Around him, the forest floor was littered with the remains of beasts, their blood soaking into the earth, the scent of death thick in the air.

His body ached slightly, though the effects of Crimson Overdrive still lingered, fueling him with enough energy to keep going for a while longer.

'Thanks to Overdrive, I can keep pushing for a bit longer,' he mused, his eyes scanning the corpses surrounding him.

'But it's clear time's almost up for this trial. Still, I've used Extraction four times now, and I'm not even feeling the strain. Impressive.'

A smirk tugged at his lips as he stood, wiping the blood from his blades. "That training paid off, after all," he muttered, raising a hand toward the fallen beasts. "Extract."

The shadows of the beasts twisted and writhed, then slithered across the ground to join with his own. He watched the process with satisfaction, his smirk widening.

'Well, the trial should be over soon. I'll just wait—'

Before he could finish his thought, a sudden shift in the atmosphere made him pause.

The very air around him thickened, the pressure building. The myst in the area swirled chaotically, as if responding to an unseen force.

The sky darkened rapidly, clouds rolling in like a tidal wave. Rain began to pour down in torrents, and the air was soon punctuated by the sharp crack of lightning.

Liam narrowed his eyes, feeling the ominous energy settle in his bones.

Something was coming.

On the other side of the forest, where Dylan and the boy with the blue flames had been battling, the scene was equally chaotic.

The ground was strewn with the corpses of beasts, steam rising from where the flames had scorched the earth.

Dylan sat on the ground, leaning back on his hands, panting heavily from exhaustion.

"Hey, blue flames," Dylan called out, his voice teasing, "looks like I got more kills than you."

The other boy, still standing but clearly worn out, shot him a sharp glare. "You wish, you airborne bastard. And stop calling me blue flames."

Dylan raised an eyebrow, an amused grin spreading across his face. "Oh? Then what should I call you? Captain Hothead? Flaming Fury? Ooh, how about Firecracker?"

"How about you shut up?" the boy snapped, visibly irritated. "It's Asher. My name is Asher. You'd know that if you ever stopped being an idiot for two seconds."

Dylan's grin widened, unbothered by the insults. "Ah, finally! A name! It only took, what, half a trial?" He pushed himself to his feet, his sarcasm evident.

"I'm Dylan, by the way. But you can call me the guy who saved your ass back there."

Asher rolled his eyes. "Saved my ass? I was the one burning through those things like it was nothing. You were just flying around like a circus act."

"Hey, it's called aerial combat, Ash." Dylan stretched his arms over his head, still grinning. "You know, strategy. Can't expect a ground-pounder like you to understand."

"Oh, screw off, blondie. You couldn't strategize your way out of a wet paper bag," Asher retorted, crossing his arms, though there was a faint twitch of a smile on his lips.

"Speaking of wet, is it raining?" Dylan extended his hand out to feel the droplets, blinking in mild surprise as the rain began to fall harder.

Asher frowned, looking up at the rapidly darkening sky. "Yeah, and those clouds... look at that." He gestured toward the ominous dark clouds rolling in from the horizon, the same ones Liam had noticed earlier.

Dylan squinted at them, looking more curious than concerned. "Those are some seriously dark clouds. Like, 'end of the world' dark. Should we be worried?"

"That's what I just said, genius," Asher grumbled, shaking his head. "Seriously, how do you even function?"

Dylan gave him a cheeky grin. "It's part of my charm. You'll get used to it."

Asher groaned in exasperation, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Gods help me."

Dylan, ignoring the frustration, looked around the clearing. "But you're right—shouldn't the trial be over by now? It's been like, what, three hours?"

Asher nodded, his expression turning serious. "Yeah, I thought so too. Something's off."

Dylan shrugged, his playful tone giving way to a more thoughtful one. "Well, whatever it is, it looks like we're not done yet."

He glanced at the darkening sky and the storm brewing overhead, feeling the weight of the myst in the air. "Guess we'll just have to see what happens next."

Asher scoffed. "Yeah, because 'waiting to see what happens' is always the best plan."

Dylan shot him a sideways glance, a smirk playing on his lips. "You really need to work on your optimism, Ash."

"I'll work on it when you stop being an idiot," Asher shot back, though his tone was less heated than before.

Dylan chuckled, wiping the rain from his face. "Deal."

Back at the academy, the atmosphere had shifted as the trial drew to a close. On the elevated platform overlooking the magical screens, Galen stood with his arms crossed, his gaze sharp yet indifferent. His patience for the ongoing trial had worn thin.

"Mystica, it's time to end this. The students have shown enough of their incompetence," Galen said with a calm but dismissive tone, turning on his heel to leave.

Mystica rolled her eyes playfully, offering a smirk. "Alright, Mr. Grumpy," she teased, waving her hand toward the screens as she prepared to cast the recall spell.

However, as she tried to activate the spell, nothing happened. Mystica frowned, trying again, then a third time—still no reaction.

A hint of concern crept into her features. She tried two more times, frustration growing with each failed attempt.

"Hey, Galen," she called, her voice tinged with worry, "something's wrong. My recall spell isn't working."

Galen, who had nearly reached the stairs of the platform, halted mid-step. He turned slowly, his expression unreadable but his tone sharp. "What do you mean, it isn't working?"

"There's... a force preventing it," Mystica muttered, her brows furrowed as her gaze flicked back to the screens.

"I've never seen anything like this before. It's as if something's blocking me. I think there must be—"

Before she could finish, her words caught in her throat as she saw something on the screen. Her heart skipped a beat.

"Isn't that the dark magic boy?" Mystica's voice dropped to a whisper as she stared at the image of Liam sprinting through the forest at an alarming speed.

But it wasn't just the speed that concerned her—it was what he was running from.

"What is he running from?" she asked aloud, her voice shaky as she tried to make sense of the scene.

Galen's eyes shifted to the screen, narrowing as he watched for only a few seconds.

Then, something dark—a massive blur—raced past the screen in the blink of an eye, moving with such speed and force that it seemed like a shadow ripping through reality itself.

The moment the figure appeared, both Mystica and Galen's expressions shifted drastically.

Mystica's playful demeanor was gone, replaced with outright fear. Galen's face, typically cold and detached, now held an edge of gravity.

"No," Mystica breathed, her hands trembling slightly. "That... that can't be possible. There's no way that kind of beast would appear in this realm. I—I checked everything before sending the students there. I made sure—"

"It doesn't matter what you checked, Mystica," Galen interrupted, his voice low but commanding, his usual calm now laced with urgency. "Get every mage in the academy here. We're out of time."

Mystica snapped her gaze toward him, panic rising. "What? What are you planning to do?"

"You'll combine your powers with mine," Galen said, stepping back toward her with an intensity she had rarely seen in him. "We don't have the luxury of subtlety anymore. I'm going in there myself."

"You're... going in? Galen, that thing is—"

"Deadly, seems like you've forgotten who I am" Galen cut her off, his tone hard and calm.

"Besides, those students may not have earned my respect, but I will not let them die because of our failure. Get the mages. Now."

Mystica hesitated for a brief moment, the weight of Galen's words sinking in. But she knew he was right.

Without another word, she turned and sent out a magical pulse, summoning every mage in the academy as fast as she could.

Galen's eyes remained fixed on the screen where the dark blur had disappeared into the stormy forest.

His expression was unreadable, but beneath the surface, his mind was racing. He had faced many dangers in his life, but this beast... this was something beyond the usual threats they dealt with.

And now, those children were caught in its path.

"I won't let this thing take them," Galen muttered to himself, clenching his fists. "Not on my watch."

The storm in the Realm of Beasts was only growing stronger. Time was running out.

Back in the Realm of Beasts, Liam sprinted through the dense forest at a speed that defied reason, his heart racing but his expression focused.

The air around him was thick with tension, and his instincts screamed at him to keep running, no matter what.

'This has to be a sick joke,' Liam thought, his breath steady despite the panic simmering inside.

'I thought these things were just legends... folk tales to scare kids into staying out of danger.'

A low rumble vibrated through the air. Liam's eyes widened in realization. 'Damn, it's right above me. No way I'm shaking this thing off.'

Suddenly, a sharp whistling sound tore through the sky—a noise so piercing it felt like the very air was being ripped apart.

Before Liam could react, a massive streak of purple light erupted from the heavens. It wasn't just light—it was fire, burning with a malevolent intensity.

The searing beam crashed into the ground just behind Liam, obliterating trees, rocks, and everything in its path. The shockwave sent him hurtling forward, like a ragdoll caught in a storm.

Liam was thrown through the air, smashing through trees and jagged rocks. Each impact jarred his body, but he gritted his teeth and twisted mid-flight, slamming his hand into the ground to skid to a stop.

Dirt sprayed around him as he dug his fingers into the earth, steadying himself. He coughed once, tasting blood in his mouth, but that only made him grin.

"Alright," he muttered, his voice low and menacing as he stood upright.

His body ached from the impact, but the rush of adrenaline and Overdrive flowing through his veins made him feel invincible. He cracked his neck, his grin widening. "Screw running..."

He lifted his head, his dark eyes gleaming with anticipation. "...I'm going to add you to my army."

As he spoke, the creature that had been chasing him finally revealed itself in the clearing ahead.

The flames that had rained down moments ago still lingered, casting an eerie purple glow across the landscape. Within that light, the silhouette of a massive beast emerged.

The ground shook beneath the weight of its landing, and the trees around it were dwarfed by its size.

A jet-black dragon, its scales gleaming like polished obsidian, stood before him. Its eyes were fierce, glowing a deep violet that seemed to pierce through the very soul.

Smoke billowed from its nostrils as it let out a deafening roar, the sound so powerful that the earth itself trembled.

Liam's grin only grew more wicked. "Perfect," he whispered to himself, his daggers materializing in his hands.

His myst swirled around him like a shadowy vortex, ready for the coming battle. The dragon might have been a legend, but so was Liam.

And he had no intention of backing down.

With one last deep breath, Liam launched forward, ready to claim his prize.