

ShadowBound 45

Chapter 45: The Ultimate Fire User

With a bone-rattling roar, the dragon lunged at Galen, its jaws snapping toward him with terrifying speed. Each step it took crushed the earth beneath its claws, sending chunks of dirt and stone flying.

Purple fire rippled along the edges of its maw, ready to incinerate anything in its path.

But Galen didn't flinch. In fact, he looked almost bored.

The moment the dragon's claws swiped toward him, Galen vanished from sight. A sharp gust of wind followed as he reappeared on the other side of the beast, his movements so fast they seemed impossible. The dragon blinked, clearly disoriented by his sudden disappearance.

"You're too slow," Galen muttered, brushing a nonexistent speck of dust off his shoulder.

The dragon snarled in frustration and whipped around, swiping its tail with devastating force. The tail cut through the air, aiming to crush Galen into the dirt.

He sidestepped effortlessly, as if dodging a casual breeze.

"You'd think something this big would be smarter." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Galen's movements were almost insulting in their ease. He flowed like a dancer across the battlefield—no wasted effort, no tension. Every time the dragon lashed out, Galen was already gone, leaving only traces of red embers in his wake.

The dragon, despite its massive size and strength, was struggling. It thrashed wildly, breathing bursts of purple fire in all directions, but nothing came close to catching Galen.

It was as if the knight had already mapped out the beast's every move before it even acted.

Galen vaulted gracefully onto the dragon's back with one fluid leap, riding along as if he were mounting a wild horse. The dragon snarled and twisted, its wings—what was left of them—flapping in vain to throw him off.

But Galen merely walked across its spine with infuriating nonchalance, as if taking a stroll.

"That all you got?" he called mockingly, hands resting on his hips.

The dragon roared again, this time with pure rage, and reared its head to unleash a deadly stream of purple flames. But Galen was already gone, vaulting effortlessly to the ground with a flick of his wrist, flames trailing in his wake.

As the dragon tried to reorient itself, Galen's sharp eyes zeroed in on the vulnerable spot Liam had uncovered earlier—the soft underbelly just beneath the ribs.

"Ah... There you are," Galen whispered, his lips curling into a wicked grin.

With a burst of speed that defied belief, he closed the distance between himself and the dragon in an instant. One moment, he was standing several meters away—the next, he was right beneath the creature, crouched low with his palm brimming with searing red flames.

"Too easy," he murmured.

With surgical precision, Galen thrust his hand upward, driving a concentrated burst of flame directly into the exposed weak spot. The flames tunneled deep into the beast's body, searing through scales and muscle alike.

In a blink, the dragon's roars of fury turned into a pained, agonized gasp. The heat of Galen's flames reached the dragon's core—the source of its life force.

The beast trembled violently, its massive body convulsing as a bright glow pulsed within it.

Then, it stopped moving altogether.

The dragon collapsed with a thunderous crash, its immense body folding in on itself as the glow from its core faded. Ash and embers drifted in the air like falling snow.

Galen stood, watching dispassionately as the enormous creature took its final, shuddering breath. When the last flicker of life drained from the beast, he turned away without a scratch on him, brushing his hands together like he had just finished a casual chore.

Behind him, the dragon's carcass lay lifeless—its reign of terror ended in mere moments.

Galen glanced over at the three boys, who were still sprawled on the ground, struggling to comprehend what they had just witnessed.

"You're welcome," Galen said with a smirk, his voice carrying the kind of arrogant confidence only someone who knew he was unstoppable could have. "That's how it's done."

He gave a mock salute and walked away without a care, flames flickering lazily around him as if even the fire itself was at his command.

Asher and Dylan lay motionless, their minds racing, grappling with the reality of Galen's overwhelming strength.

The once-mighty dragon lay lifeless beside them, its enormous frame still radiating residual heat from the knight's flames.

The two boys exchanged brief glances, wordless in their frustration and awe. Galen's power was on a different level, and it stung.

Liam, however, was stunned for only a moment. His mind quickly shifted from marveling at Galen to something far more important—the dragon's carcass.

His eyes, barely open, flicked toward the beast. Despite his battered body feeling like dead weight, Liam's determination burned fierce. 'This not over... not yet you bastard'

Every muscle screamed in protest, but with painstaking effort, he managed to move his left arm—just enough. Fingers trembling, he stretched his hand toward the dragon's massive corpse, dark mist coiling from his shadow.

"Extract..." he whispered, the word scraping out of his dry throat. It was barely audible, but it carried power.

In an instant, the dragon's massive shadow trembled, as if possessed by an unseen force. It writhed and twisted unnaturally, slithering across the ground like a living thing.

Then, with a sudden surge, the dragon's shadow was pulled—as if caught in a gravitational pull—and merged seamlessly into Liam's own. The blackness coiled deep within him, a new and terrifying power bound to his will.

Liam felt it—the raw, untamed essence of the dragon now slumbering within his shadow. Its strength, fury, and remnants of its core became part of him.

Even though his body was broken, the knowledge that he had secured such a powerful ally sent a flicker of triumph through his mind.

Galen, standing a few paces away, remained calm, his cold expression untouched by the boys' efforts or the dragon's defeat. He looked up toward the sky, his dark red hair flickering lightly in the fading breeze.

His voice, low and measured, carried just enough authority to remind everyone present who was truly in control.

"Time to bring us back, Mystica," he murmured.

The air shimmered for a moment, thick with latent myst. Galen's gaze didn't waver as he waited, unbothered and unconcerned, as if this entire ordeal had been little more than an annoying detour.

Behind him, Liam's breathing slowed, exhaustion finally dragging him toward unconsciousness. But even as darkness claimed him, a small, satisfied smile touched his lips. The dragon is mine now.

And the battlefield grew silent, waiting for Mystica's magic to bring them back.

The sun hung low over the academy grounds, casting long shadows across the field where the returning students had gathered.

Many stood quietly, their faces pale with exhaustion, bandages wrapped around injuries still raw from the brutal trials they had endured in the realm of beasts.

The mages had done their part in healing the worst of their wounds, but the sting of defeat—and survival—lingered in the air.

All eyes were on Galen, standing on the elevated platform, arms crossed, his expression colder than a winter frost. He scanned the crowd, sharp-eyed and unapologetic, as though judging every soul present.

"Most of you..." Galen began, his voice low but razor-sharp, "...are nothing but trash."

His words struck the crowd like a slap, leaving many stunned. Murmurs began rippling through the students, some glancing nervously at one another, others clenching their fists in frustration. Galen's lip curled in disdain.

"Some of you didn't even last thirty minutes in that trial. Pathetic." He let the word hang in the air, his contempt unmasked. "But somehow, there might still be a flicker of hope for you... though not in this academy."

The murmuring swelled, whispers of anger and disbelief spreading like wildfire. But Galen's voice cut through it all, cold as steel.

"Shut it before I lose my patience," he warned, his tone enough to snuff out every stray sound. Silence fell again, thick and oppressive.

"Consider yourselves lucky," Galen continued, voice dripping with indifference.

"Some of you might get picked by knight academies across the zones. But for those of you who don't... well, maybe working on your father's farm is more your speed." He gave a dismissive wave, his words as merciless as a guillotine.

The crowd stood frozen in stunned disbelief, too shocked to speak.

"Out of the two hundred students who entered the trial," Galen continued, "only ninety-four of you are staying. The rest of you..." He gestured toward Mystica, who stood silently at his side, her hands already glowing with magic. "... get lost."

One by one, the rejected students disappeared, vanishing along with their belongings as Mystica's spell took hold.

A ripple of unease spread through the remaining students as the crowd thinned, leaving only ninety-four standing under Galen's unrelenting gaze.

"As for the rest of you..." Galen's eyes scanned the survivors with contempt. "Don't get any ideas. You're only here because you were slightly better than the ones who failed. A drop of water in the ocean—nothing more."

His gaze darkened, but then a hint of interest flickered across his stern face. "That said... three of you managed to catch my attention."

His eyes settled on Liam, Asher, and Dylan, who stood side by side. Their bodies were healed, but their torn clothing bore silent testimony to the deadly battle they had fought.

Dylan, ever the joker, wore his usual grin, as if the whole ordeal had been a grand adventure. Asher's sharp, competitive glare remained intact, his expression full of unspoken defiance.

Liam stood quietly, his face unreadable, the weight of his thoughts locked behind a mask of calm indifference.

Galen's gaze lingered on them for a moment longer before shifting back to the group. "Now, before you're escorted to your dorms by these fine people..." He gestured to the group of officials waiting nearby, "...you need to understand something."

His tone grew heavier. "Every year, we accept one hundred students into the academy. You might be wondering why there are only ninety-four of you standing here now."

The students glanced at one another, confusion spreading through the crowd.

"The reason is simple," Galen said. "Six students have already been accepted through recommendation. They were strong enough to earn their place without needing to crawl through trials like the rest of you."

His eyes locked onto Liam, Asher, and Dylan. "So before any of you start thinking you're the strongest, know this—those six are already ahead of you. Stronger than any of you."

The weight of his words crushed any lingering sense of pride among the students, especially the three boys. Dylan's grin faltered slightly for the first time, Asher clenched his jaw, and as for Liam, he could care less about anyone but himself.

Galen's eyes narrowed as he delivered his final command. "Now, get your halfworthy asses out of my sight."

With that, the gathered students began to move, each escorted by one of the academy staff.

The weight of Galen's words—and the knowledge of the unknown five students waiting ahead—settled heavily on their shoulders as they made their way toward their new dorms.

As the crowd thinned, Galen remained on the platform, arms crossed, watching them leave with the same cold, calculating expression. The game had only just begun.