

ShadowBound 102

Chapter 102: Everyone Breaks Eventually

"Hurry up, Ariana! We can't miss this!" Dylan darted through the forest with his characteristic acrobatic flair, leaping over fallen logs and swinging around low-hanging branches as if the terrain was his personal playground. A wide grin stretched across his face, his excitement palpable.

"Is that all you ever think about?" Ariana called after him, struggling to keep pace. Her auburn hair trailed behind her as her glasses slipped down her nose slightly from the motion. Her tone was sharp, though tinged with exasperation. "What if they interrupt the forest's illusion spell because of all this?"

"Oh, yeah, good point!" Dylan shouted back, his grin growing mischievous. "Another reason we need to hurry! Don't want to miss the fireworks, hehehe!" He picked up his pace even more, his movements becoming a blur of effortless agility.

"Hey! Wait up!" Ariana yelled, frustration growing as she tried to keep up, her breathing uneven as her chest rose and fell with the effort.

Minutes later, Dylan suddenly came to a halt, landing softly on the forest floor after flipping off a sturdy branch. His entire demeanor shifted, his usual carefree energy replaced by a quiet stillness.

Ariana finally caught up, panting heavily as she slowed to a stop beside him. "W-What the... hell is wrong with you?" she snapped between gasps for air, hands on her knees. "I told you to wait up!"

She straightened after a moment, pushing her glasses back into place. "Why are you just standing there like—" Her words trailed off as she followed his gaze and finally saw what had him transfixed.

The forest before them was transformed, a surreal landscape of frozen beauty. Ice coated the ground and trees, shimmering like glass in the sunlight.

The branches were encased in crystalline frost, and the air itself felt heavy with residual myst. It was a battlefield frozen in time, a testament to the ferocity of the clash that had taken place here.

"Whoa..." Dylan muttered, his voice unusually subdued. He stepped forward, his boots crunching against the icy ground. "They really went all out, huh?"

"Yeah," Ariana breathed, her green eyes wide behind her glasses as she took in the scene. The sun's rays refracted through the ice, casting faint rainbows that danced across the frozen expanse.

The two continued further into the icy clearing, their steps crunching softly against the frost-covered ground. The air was heavy, the aftermath of the battle evident in every frozen branch and shimmering shard. It didn't take long before they spotted her.

Sheila sat slumped against a tree, her back resting against the frosted bark. Her arms were folded over her knees, her head buried in them, shielding her face from view. She looked small, a stark contrast to the confident, commanding presence she usually exuded.

Dylan's smirk faltered, replaced by a faint look of concern. Still, he couldn't resist his usual tone. "Looks like someone lost the fight," he whispered to Ariana, though his voice carried a softness not often heard.

Stepping forward, he called out, "Hey, Icy Heart."

"Get lost, Dylan. Not in the mood," Sheila muttered, her voice muffled but edged with frustration. Her face remained hidden, buried in her arms as if to shield herself from the world.

Dylan tilted his head, scratching the back of his neck. "Don't wanna talk about it? Fair enough. But we need to move. The illusion spell needs to repair the damage, and staying here will mess that up."

"Yeah, he's right," Ariana added, her tone gentle but firm. "If we don't leave, the spell could malfunction completely."

They waited for a response, but Sheila didn't stir. Dylan glanced at Ariana, his usual grin replaced by an uncertain frown.

"Sheila..." he started again, but the words caught in his throat as she moved.

Sheila slowly rose to her feet, brushing frost from her arms. Her hair fell forward, partially obscuring her face, but her silence spoke volumes. Without sparing them a glance or a word, she walked past them, her steps deliberate and heavy, like a soldier retreating from a battle lost but not forgotten.

Ariana and Dylan stood still, watching her figure disappear into the distance. The weight of the moment hung in the frozen air, unspoken yet understood.

Dylan let out a breath, clapping his hands together in an attempt to break the tension. "Well, that was... dramatic. Let's get moving before the forest decides to eat us or something," he said, his grin returning, though it didn't quite reach his eyes.

Ariana nodded, her gaze lingering on the path Sheila had taken. "Yeah. Let's go."

And with that, they turned, leaving the icy battlefield behind, their thoughts as cold and restless as the air around them.

The crisp air of the forest had been replaced by the bustling energy of the academy grounds. The sun hung low, casting warm golden hues across the sprawling courtyards and neatly trimmed gardens. Students milled about, some moving back to their dorms, others lounging on benches, engrossed in conversations.

Dylan strolled ahead of Ariana, his hands tucked casually behind his head. "You think Icy Heart's gonna be okay?" he asked, his tone light but with a hint of genuine curiosity.

Ariana walked beside him, her delicate glasses catching the sunlight as she adjusted them. "She'll recover," she replied, her voice filled with concern. "But whatever happened in that clearing really got to her."

Dylan chuckled, though it was softer than usual. "Guess Liam finally found a way to shut her up, huh? Not that I blame her for being rattled. That guy seems to be on another level when he gets serious."

Ariana shot him a glance, "You're making light of it, but you know it's more than just a bruised ego. Sheila's built herself on being untouchable. Losing like that—it shakes everything she stands on."

Dylan sighed, lowering his hands as his grin faded slightly. "Yeah, yeah. I get it. But hey, maybe this is what she needs. A little reality check to keep her grounded."

Ariana didn't respond immediately, her gaze drifting to a group of students chattering in the distance as they showed off their magic. The vibrant display of myst energies—flames, water, and even bolts of lightning—filled the air.

"You're not entirely wrong," she finally said. "But Sheila's not like you, Dylan. She doesn't laugh things off or bounce back easily. If anything, she doubles down—harder, colder."

Dylan smirked again, but it didn't carry his usual playfulness. "Colder? I mean, sure, she's literally ice, but you're acting like she's some unbreakable glacier. Everyone cracks eventually, Ariana. Even her."