

ShadowBound 230

Chapter 230: End Of Semester Exam 1

The five days of preparation had finally come to an end, and the students were more than ready. As the morning sunlight bathed the academy in a golden glow, the first-years, fully geared up, gathered inside the designated exam dome.

The dome itself was a marvel—grand in both design and scale. Its towering exterior hinted at something extraordinary, but as the students stood inside, waiting for Headmaster Thion's final announcement, unease crept in.

He had spoken of a vast landscape, a holographic battlefield where the exam would take place. But looking around, the dome felt far too small for something of that scale.

"Uh... are we sure this is the right place?" Dylan muttered, gazing up at the ceiling. "Because—"

"It's not big enough? Yeah, we all see that, Blondie," Asher cut in, adjusting his sword at his side.

"You two should keep it down," Sheila warned, tying her hair into a tight ponytail with her sword resting at her hip. "The Headmaster could show up any second."

Dylan raised an eyebrow. "Show up? From where? Because unless that man can phase through walls, I don't see him walking through those locked doors." He gestured toward the massive, sealed entrance.

"Just shut it, will you?" Sheila shot back, clearly unimpressed.

Dylan grinned, giving her a mock salute. "Oh, sorry, Commander. I'll be on my best behavior."

Before Sheila could fire back at Dylan, the lights in the dome flickered, and a low hum vibrated through the walls. The students tensed as a magical holographic projection began materializing at the center of the dome.

Within moments, the figure took full shape—Headmaster Thion. His towering, 15-foot holographic form loomed over the gathered students, ensuring everyone could see him. He stood tall and composed, hands clasped behind his back, his gaze sweeping over the crowd.

"Good morning, first-years," Thion greeted, his deep voice echoing through the dome. "I can see that you're all prepared for what's ahead." He noted the shift in energy from the midterms—this time, they were sharper, more disciplined.

"Now, before we begin, let me clarify something." His sharp eyes flickered with amusement. "I'm sure many of you are wondering how this dome could possibly contain the kind of battlefield I described."

Murmurs rippled through the crowd.

"For those of you who study Dimensional disciplines, you might already have an idea of what's about to happen," he continued. "This dome may seem small from the outside, but its interior is enhanced with spatial magic, allowing it to expand far beyond its physical limits.

"As the space stretches, the holographic system will generate your battlefield in real time, creating the vast terrain required for your exam."

Silence settled over the students.

"With that out of the way, let me remind you just how real this exam is going to feel," Thion said, his voice unwavering.

"You will feel pain. You will experience fear like never before. Every sensation—the weight of your weapons, the impact of your attacks, the exhaustion in your limbs—will be indistinguishable from reality. Even death will feel real." His sharp gaze swept across the students. "There will be no academy knights rushing in to heal you. No safety nets. You will taste the true nature of war."

"One more thing," he continued. "If you sustain fatal injuries and 'die' in this simulation, your real body will be teleported out of the exam. However, your fallen form will remain on the battlefield as a holographic projection, serving as a reminder of your defeat."

The tension in the air thickened.

"Now, prepare yourselves," Thion said, his tone final. "Your exam begins in five." His gaze then shifted to two specific individuals. "Sheila. Chris."

"Show the academy—and your fellow students—why you were chosen as Leader and Vice Leader for this exam."

With that, the colossal holographic figure of Thion flickered and vanished, leaving the students in uneasy murmurs, the weight of his words pressing down on them.

"So, any chance Chris is willing to cooperate with you?" Charlotte asked, arms crossed, her sharp eyes scanning the crowd.

"Nope. I've given up on that," Sheila said, shaking her head. "It's better to focus on the majority that's actually on my side."

"Good call," Charlotte said with a nod. "Still, I can't help but wonder how this will play out. If we're supposed to function as one unit but we're already divided into two factions, won't that cause chaos?"

Max, standing nearby with his dual swords crisscrossed on his back, sighed. "She's got a point. This isn't a competition—it's a war scenario. If we don't act as one, we might fail before we even begin."

Sheila exhaled. "You're both right, but I can't let Chris and his ego derail what we need to do. My goal is to get everyone on the same page... somehow."

Liam, who had been silent until now, adjusted his sword and spoke calmly, "I wouldn't count on that."

Sheila turned to him, brows furrowing. "Why do you say that?"

Liam glanced toward Chris, who stood among a cluster of students—likely the ones aligned with his way of thinking. Then, he looked back at Sheila. "One, because it's Chris. Two, just a gut feeling. If anything, he'll do whatever it takes to make sure everyone follows his orders, and his alone."

Sheila's lips pressed into a thin line. "So, you're saying the only way to unite the group is if I step down?"

"Maybe," Liam said. "But don't. That'd be playing right into his hands."

Before Sheila could respond, a deep rumble coursed through the dome. The ground trembled beneath their feet as the structure itself began to shift, stretching and morphing. The ceiling flickered, its pristine surface dissolving into a vast, blood-red sky streaked with dark, swirling clouds.

The transformation spread outward like wildfire. What had been a confined dome was now an endless wasteland—barren, cracked earth stretching in every direction. To the west, jagged mountains loomed ominously, their rocky peaks sharp against the distorted sky. To the east, in the far distance, a small city shimmered like a mirage. It was faint but unmistakable—the civilians Thion had warned them about. The ones they were supposed to protect.

The battlefield had been set.

A heavy silence settled over the students as they absorbed their new reality. The air was thick with dust and a faint metallic tang—like dried blood clinging to the wind. The ground beneath them was cracked and uneven, scorched as if countless battles had already been fought here.

Liam glanced at Sheila, who stood motionless, staring out at the wasteland. "You gonna give your orders, or are we just waiting for the demons to show up first?"

Sheila blinked, snapping out of her daze. She clenched her fists, inhaling deeply. "Yeah... Zoned out for a second."

She straightened, her voice cutting through the murmurs. "Alright, listen up!"

The scattered conversations died down instantly as everyone turned toward her.

"We don't have time to waste. We don't know where the demons will attack from, so we need to map out this battlefield now."

She gestured toward the west. "First, I don't trust those mountains. If anything, that's where the bulk of the demons will come from. North and south could be attack points as well."

"So what's the plan?" Max asked.

"We form a defensive line to protect the city to the east—ten to fifteen knights should be enough. The rest of us will form a tight, concrete battle formation facing the west, north, and south. Our best fighters—the top ten—will be stationed across the frontlines to balance our power. Dylan, Ariana, I want you two to lead the defensive line protecting the city."

Dylan tilted his head, intrigued. "No complaints from me. With your formation, our job will be to keep civilians safe if any demons slip past you guys." He slung his metallic bow over his shoulder.

"Exactly," Sheila nodded. "And Dylan, you have an extra duty."

Dylan raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"With your eyesight, I assume your range is insane. If anyone's in danger from a blind spot, you take the shot before they even realize what's coming."

Dylan smirked. "So I'm on double duty, huh? Sounds like a pain... but I am a professional." He gave a dramatic salute. "Fine, I'll keep an eye on everyone. But who are the thirteen people Ariana and I are leading?"

Sheila scanned the gathered students. During their five days of preparation, she had done more than strategize—she had studied each student, learning their affinities, strengths, and weaknesses.

After a few moments of consideration, she selected the thirteen that would complete the defensive team. Once she had gathered them, she quickly explained their roles and emphasized that they would be following Dylan and Ariana's commands.

Dylan clapped his hands together. "Alright, my men and... women! Off to the city borders we go! Best job we could ask for—no demons for us to fight since the frontliners will take care of everything. Easiest gig ever." He grinned as he turned on his heel, leading the way with his usual charisma.

Liam glanced at Ariana before she left. "Good luck."

Ariana smiled warmly. "Thanks, Liam. You too—stay safe."

With that, she turned and followed Dylan toward the city.