

## ShadowBound 236

### Chapter 236: End Of Semester Exam 7

Back in the city, though Chris had just torn through the skies and wrecked a whole swarm of horrors, the damage had already been done. The city's defenders were bleeding out, struggling just to hold their ground.

Dylan's squad had been hammered—just like the main battlefield. Out of the fifteen students assigned to protect the civilians and act as reserves, only five remained. Ten were already sprawled across the streets, their broken bodies lying in crimson puddles, faces twisted in disbelief.

Dylan, Ariana, the ginger-haired girl, and two battered boys were all that was left, still fighting like cornered wolves to defend the city's heart.

Before Chris had swooped in like a storm to cut down the bulk of the horrors, several Vyraxes and Ravagers had already breached the perimeter. The aftermath was grim—civilians ripped apart in the chaos, students crushed or torn to shreds before they could even react.

Ariana stood at the rear, her face strained but unwavering as she maintained a shimmering magical barrier that enveloped the last group of terrified civilians. Each pulse of her myst felt like lifting mountains, but she refused to let it fall.

Sweat streaked her temple as she flung magic bolts toward encroaching horrors, barely doing enough to stagger them. Yet, those brief moments of hesitation in the horrors' advance gave Dylan and the others just enough breathing room to strike.

"Oi, Ginger... elevation," Dylan grunted, spotting some Ravagers about to leap from a nearby rooftop.

The ginger-haired girl stomped the ground with force, sending a shockwave through the earth. In an instant, the ground beneath Dylan surged upward like a platform, catapulting him high into the air.

Eyes narrowed, bow drawn—Dylan grinned mid-air. "Showtime."

He soared above like a hawk, loosing arrows that cracked with metallic force. Each bolt found its mark—splitting skulls, piercing through chests, and pinning Horrors to walls and craters. He landed with a roll, creating another arrow before his feet even touched the ground. Two Ravagers lunged at him, but Dylan spun low, sending a steel-tipped shaft straight through one's throat before swinging his bow like a club into the jaw of the other, staggering it back.

"Stay down," he snarled, pinning the beast to the ground with another arrow through its skull.

But there was no rest. More Ravagers poured in from the shadows, leaping from shattered buildings, their blade-like protrusions gleaming beneath the stormy skies. Behind Dylan, Ariana's magical barrier flickered as civilians huddled in terror.

The two boys beside Dylan—both bruised and bloody but stubborn—rallied at his sides. Together, they stood firm against the coming wave. The boys handled themselves well, flanking Dylan and spearing a Ravager through its gut, forcing it back into the dirt.

But they were running on fumes. The next assault hit fast.

One Ravager blitzed in from the flank, slicing deep into one boy's abdomen. His scream was choked out by the blade that followed, severing him clean.

"NO!" Ariana gasped, hands trembling around her barrier as she saw her comrade collapse lifelessly.

Before the second boy could even react, a Vyraxe swooped down from the sky, talons hooking into his shoulders. It tore him into the air, wings flapping wildly as the boy thrashed, his panicked cries fading into a sickening silence as the beast crushed him mid-flight and dropped his corpse like discarded prey.

The impact of his body hitting the ground echoed across the battlefield.

Ariana's eyes widened, her breath caught in her throat. Blood sprayed from the fallen boy and splattered across her cheek, warm and slick. The crimson smear felt horrifyingly real against her pale skin.

That was it. Her mind buckled.

Her knees trembled as the barrier around the civilians flickered violently, cracks spiderwebbing across its surface. Ariana clenched her teeth, trying to focus—but the massacre, the screams, the heavy scent of blood in the air, and the twisted corpses of friends and strangers alike—it drowned her.

She broke.

Tears welled as she dropped to her knees, shaking uncontrollably. "It's just a simulation," she tried to remind herself, but the weight of the blood on her face, the thudding of dead bodies—none of it felt fake anymore.

Dylan glanced over, eyes narrowing as he saw Ariana's breakdown. "Damn it, Ariana... hang on," he muttered, raising his bow again as more Ravagers began to circle in like vultures.

He fired in a blur—two arrows at a time, five volleys in rapid succession. The air hissed with the sharp whistle of steel splitting through the storm. One by one, the Ravagers dropped, bodies pierced and pinned like grotesque trophies in the mud. His precision was unreal, hands moving so fast it was like his arrows were manifesting only after he let go of the bowstring.

The last Ravager crumpled in a heap, and Dylan didn't waste a breath. Slinging his bow over his back, he sprinted through the battlefield and dropped to one knee beside Ariana. Her shoulders trembled as she sobbed, curled in on herself like she could shrink away from the blood and death.

"Hey—Ari. Ari! Look at me," Dylan urged, voice softer but firm. He placed a steady hand on her shoulder. "Come on, you're stronger than this."

Ariana's eyes were wide, glassy, and unfocused. Dylan felt a pang in his chest—this wasn't like her. Not the Ariana who always smiled, always calmed the group down, even in chaos.

'Damn them.' Dylan clenched his jaw, forcing his anger down. Inside his head, though, he raged.

'What the hell is this, Academy?' he thought bitterly. 'This isn't training or an exam—it's a slaughterhouse. They stacked this sim against us from the start. Outnumbered, overwhelmed. How the hell were we supposed to win?'

His hands curled into fists. 'They set us up to fail.'

"Dylan!" the ginger-haired girl's voice cut through the storm, sharp and panicked. "We've still got incoming! Ravagers, and I can't hold them off much longer!"

Dylan cursed under his breath, but then turned back to Ariana. He breathed out and softened his tone, though it cracked with exhaustion.

"Listen, Ari. I get it, alright? This is hell—but you're not alone in it. We need you. The civilians need you," Dylan said, voice more raw than usual. "This—this whole bloodbath—it's fake. We're in a damn sim, remember? Don't let this place break you."

She sniffled, eyes locking onto his. "But... they—"

"I know," he interrupted gently. "I know. But if you fall here, it feels real, right? We can't afford to lose you. Not here. Not now."

Ariana stared at him, hands still shaking, but her breathing slowed. Something about Dylan, usually the joker, stepping into this serious role—it steadied her.

"You've got this," Dylan finished, voice like steel.

Ariana wiped the blood from her cheek and nodded weakly, rising to shaky feet. But the toll on all of them was obvious. The ginger-haired girl, Ariana, even Dylan himself—all running on empty, their myst barely flickering now. The dome of Ariana's barrier sputtered behind them like a dying flame.

Dylan stepped forward, sizing up the horde of Ravagers storming their way. His stomach tightened. He knew the spell—the one spell—that could hold them off. But it would drain him dry. And honestly? It could wreck him.

'Do I really wanna try this suicidal magic trick right now?' Dylan's thoughts raced. 'I could just pretend I twisted my ankle... nah, too late for that.'

He let out a sigh, half annoyed, half amused. 'Screw it.'

"Hey, Ari," Dylan said suddenly. "You think you can give me a little boost with that light magic of yours?"

Ariana blinked. "A boost? I can barely stand, Dylan."

"I don't need much," he grinned. "Just enough juice to keep me standing after this."

Ariana hesitated, but then nodded. "It'll be a slight buff, nothing more."

"That's all I need."

Dylan spun on his heel, pointing to the ginger-haired girl. "You—earthen dome. Get inside with Ari and the civvies, now."

"What?" Ariana gasped. "Wait, Dylan—don't do something reckless—"

"Too late," he said with a smirk. "Come on, trust me."

The ginger-haired girl, biting her lip, nodded and raised trembling hands to summon a thick earthen dome around the weakened barrier, encasing the civilians and herself inside.

Ariana lingered, torn. "Dylan..."

"Go," Dylan said firmly. "I'll handle this."

And despite everything—the exhaustion, the chaos, the storm—he winked at her, like this was all part of some insane plan.

"Besides," he muttered under his breath as he faced the Ravagers, "what's the worst that could happen?"