SHADOWBOUND: THE NEED FOR POWER

As Liam sat in the dimming light of the dining room, the sound of approaching footsteps broke through his thoughts. Dain entered first, accompanied by a graceful woman with a kind smile and a girl whose face lit up the moment she saw Liam. Without hesitation, Liam stood up, trying to show respect to the family, but Dain quickly intervened.

"No, no need for that, Liam," Dain said with a light chuckle. "We're not so formal here."

Liam, his face still unreadable, slowly sat back down. Despite the warmth surrounding him, his guard remained up. Dain and his family took their seats, with Dain's daughter, Elsie, sitting next to Liam. She had an infectious warmth about her, her eyes gleaming with curiosity and kindness.

"Hello, I'm Elsie," she said with a bright smile, her tone gentle but lively.

Unused to this much kindness and attention, Liam hesitated, his mind scrambling for the appropriate response. Finally, he managed, "I'm Liam," his voice steady, though he was unsure how he should sound.

"Nice to meet you, Liam!" Elsie said, her enthusiasm undeterred by his muted response.

Across the table, Mrs. Rose Silverhart, a woman of quiet grace and poise, chuckled softly. "He's an interesting one, isn't he?"

"He certainly is, darling," Dain agreed with a smile, his eyes briefly resting on Liam with curiosity and respect.

"Well, Liam," Dain continued, "this is my wife, Rose, and our daughter, Elsie."

Rose inclined her head gently. "I'm pleased to finally meet you, Liam. My husband has told me about how he found you, and I'm glad to see you recovering."

"It's nice to meet you too, Mrs. Rose," Liam replied, his tone polite but guarded.

"Why don't we eat, and save the rest of the conversation for later?" Dain suggested, noticing the slight tension in Liam's posture.

"Good idea," Rose agreed, her voice soft and warm.

At Dain's signal, Ane, who had been standing quietly near the door, stepped forward, calling for the maids to bring in the food. As the dishes were placed on the table, the rich aromas filled the room, making Liam's stomach twist slightly. He hadn't eaten a proper meal in so long that the scent alone was overwhelming.

Memories of his survival in the Dark Forest came rushing back—the times he'd eaten tree bark just to stay alive, or the moments when he had no choice but to consume the flesh of slain creatures, often raw and unpalatable. And water, if it could even be called that, had been little more than dirty stream runoff, barely enough to quench his thirst but enough to keep him alive.

The stark contrast between that life and the feast laid before him now was almost too much to process. He could feel his composure slipping but caught himself just before his expression could betray him. Quietly, he began to eat, doing his best to mimic the elegant manner in which the Silverharts handled their utensils. Though far from fancy, Liam did his best not to make a mess.

The meal passed mostly in silence, with the Silverharts exchanging occasional glances and small talk. Liam, on the other hand, ate methodically, focusing more on keeping his thoughts in check rather than fully enjoying the food.

When they finished, Elsie turned toward Liam, her eyes full of curiosity. "How old are you?"

Liam, still adjusting to this newfound attention, paused. 'She's so… clingy,' he thought to himself. After quickly calculating based on the year Dain had told him earlier, he replied, "I'm 14."

Elsie's face lit up even more. "I knew it!" she exclaimed happily. "I'm 14 too! I had a feeling we'd be the same age."

Liam offered no response, unsure of what to say or how to react to her excitement.

Rose leaned in slightly, her tone shifting to one of concern. "Liam, do you have any family?"

Her question brought a brief silence to the table. Liam, choosing his words carefully, finally responded, "No, none that I know of… The only family I had was my grandfather. But he's… he's gone now." His voice remained steady, his face emotionless, but beneath the surface, the pain of loss flickered.

"That's terrible," Rose said softly, her hand resting gently on the table. "I'm glad you accepted Dain's offer to stay with us. I hope you'll come to feel at home here."

Liam didn't respond immediately, his thoughts once again wandering. 'They're all so kind,' he thought. 'Nobles in Benbrok were nothing like this… they were greedy, selfish, with no kindness at all. Yet here… even the maids seem to care.'

Just as he was lost in thought, Elsie's voice cut through the haze.

"Come on, Dad!" she said, her tone playfully insistent. "I'd be a great tour guide for Liam. He'll love the school, I just know it."

Dain smiled patiently at his daughter's enthusiasm. "I understand, sweetheart, but what if he isn't interested? He's only been here for a day."

Elsie pouted for a moment before turning to Liam, her eyes wide with excitement. "What do you say, Liam? Wouldn't you want me to show you around my school tomorrow?"

Liam blinked, caught off guard by her sudden attention. He had spent so much time on the move, rarely staying in one place, that the thought of settling down—even temporarily—felt strange. But he found himself nodding. "Yes, I'd like that."

Elsie's joy was immediate. "Yesss! You're going to love it!" she said, practically bouncing in her seat. "I'll even teach you some magic, if you want."

"Hold on, sweetheart," Dain interjected with a chuckle. "Liam will decide if he wants to attend school at all. Besides, with him being 14, he'd only have one year left before he could move on to a knight academy or a mage academy."

Elsie waved her hand dismissively, her enthusiasm undimmed. "I know, Dad, but I'm sure Liam will choose a mage academy! We could even transcend together and become great mages!"

Dain and Rose exchanged amused glances, chuckling softly at their daughter's boundless excitement. But Liam's mind froze at the word 'transcend.' The word echoed in his thoughts, triggering flashes of his last moments in the Dark Forest—images of darkness, power, and the battle with Jamak flickered in his mind. For a brief moment, the room seemed to dim, the memories tugging at him.

But despite the storm of thoughts swirling inside him, Liam remained calm, his expression unchanged. No one in the room could see the battle raging within.

The night passed quickly as the conversation at the dinner table carried on. The Silverharts made it easy for Liam to engage, though he found himself mostly listening. Their warmth and lightheartedness reminded him of what he'd lost, but it also stirred something unfamiliar—an unease at their kindness, like a world he wasn't quite sure he belonged to.

As the evening came to a close, they all rose from their seats, ready to retire for the night. Elsie, as spirited as ever, made her way over to Liam, arms outstretched for a hug. It caught him off guard, her sudden affection. He stood stiffly, unsure how to react, but she didn't seem to mind. As she pulled away, she waved at him cheerfully.

"Goodnight, Liam! I'll see you tomorrow!" she chirped, her energy never dimming.

Liam gave a small nod, but remained silent. He watched as she exited the room with her parents, Dain casting him a quick smile over his shoulder before the door closed behind them.

With the room empty, Liam exhaled slowly, the noise of conversation fading into the quiet of the house. He pushed his chair back and stood, preparing to make his way back to his room, when Ane appeared in the doorway.

"Young sir, would you like me to escort you back to your room?" Ane asked, her voice as soft and steady as ever.

Liam shook his head politely, feeling the weight of the day beginning to settle on him. "Thank you, but I can manage on my own," he replied.

Ane gave a respectful nod, understanding his wish for solitude. "As you wish, Liam. Sleep well."

He didn't linger long after that. His steps through the hallways were slow, almost contemplative. The mansion was bathed in the glow of dim lanterns, casting long shadows across the floor. The soft creak of the wooden floorboards beneath his boots was the only sound accompanying him.

His crimson eyes gleamed faintly as he approached his room, the faint echo of memories tugging at the edge of his consciousness. The warmth of the Silverhart family, their laughter and kindness—these were things he hadn't experienced in years, things that made him feel more out of place than at ease.

When he finally reached his door, he slipped inside, closing it quickly behind him. The quiet of his room wrapped around him like a familiar cloak. For a brief moment, he stood in the darkness, feeling the weight of everything he had been through in the last few years. Slowly, a grin spread across his face, his hand running through his dark hair.

"Now it's all coming back to me," he muttered, his voice barely above a whisper.

He paced across the room, his thoughts unraveling in his mind. "Transcendent Affinity... that's what it was. But Draven barely told me anything useful about it." He stopped, frustration flickering in his eyes. "What a pain…"

The memory of Draven's cryptic lessons surfaced—he had trained Liam in the ways of dark magic, in combat, in survival. But when it came to the deeper

knowledge, the hidden truths about magic and power, Draven had always held back. Like pieces of a puzzle Liam wasn't ready to solve.

He clenched his fists, letting the frustration wash over him before releasing it with a deep sigh. "But it's alright," he said quietly to himself, his tone shifting to something more determined. "Accepting to go to school here—it's a perfect opportunity to learn what I need. More than that, it's a step toward fulfilling Grandpa's wish of me attending the Dark Knight Academy."

The Transcendent Affinity was just another mystery on his journey—a path that had brought him through the darkest depths of the Kyrell Forest and now, to this place. A noble household, a school of magic, a chance to learn what Draven hadn't taught him.

But as Liam stood alone in the quiet of his room, he felt the weight of the forest still clinging to him—the relentless battles, the creatures, Jamak. His body bore scars hidden beneath his clothes, remnants of the life he'd fought to survive. The world of the Silverharts, with its warmth and comfort, was something foreign, something that felt like it could slip away at any moment.

A knock on the door broke through his thoughts.

Liam's eyes narrowed slightly before he called out, "Come in."

The door creaked open, and there stood Dain, his presence calm yet commanding. He stepped inside without hesitation, a small smile on his face. "I figured you might want to talk," he said, closing the door behind him.

Liam raised an eyebrow, intrigued but cautious. "Talk?"

Dain's eyes softened, and he leaned against the wall. "I've noticed you've been carrying a lot on your shoulders, Liam. You don't need to share it if you're not ready, but I want you to know that you're not alone. Whatever burdens you have, you don't have to carry them by yourself."

Liam remained silent for a moment, processing Dain's words. He realized if he didn't say the right words, he might just say things about the dark forest.

After a pause, Liam finally spoke, his voice quiet. "I've lived life mostly rejected by people and being here... it's just to much for me"

Dain nodded, his expression understanding. "I can't imagine what you've been through. But give it time. The school, my family—this place can help you find peace, even if it's just a little bit."

Liam's eyes met Dain's, and for the first time, there was a flicker of something other than detachment in his gaze—something like gratitude.

"I'll try," Liam said simply.

Dain gave a small smile, satisfied. "That's all I ask."

With that, Dain turned to leave. Before he exited, he glanced back over his shoulder. "Remember, you're welcome here for as long as you need, Liam. Goodnight."

As the door closed behind Dain, Liam found himself staring at the empty space where he had stood. His mind was still a storm of thoughts, but for the first time since arriving, there was a small sense of relief.

He lay down on the bed, staring up at the ceiling, his thoughts quieter now. Slowly, his eyes closed, and sleep took him—dreams of flames, darkness, and the unknown future waiting for him.