

ShadowBound 15

Chapter 15: Welcome To The School Of Magic

The first light of dawn crept over the city of Nystra, bathing its stone streets and towering buildings in a soft golden hue. The sun's rays gently kissed the walls of the Silverhart estate, casting long shadows that danced across the gardens and the outer walls.

Inside, the house was already stirring with life. Maids moved swiftly and silently through the halls, each attending to their morning duties with the grace and precision expected in such a household.

Ane, ever punctual and poised, made her way down the corridor leading to Liam's room. Her steps were measured, her posture perfect, exuding the elegance of her station. Reaching the door, she paused, knocking gently but firmly.

"Liam, it's Ane," she called out, waiting for a response.

After a few seconds of silence, she pressed her ear to the door, listening for any movement. Hearing nothing, she decided to enter. "I'm coming in, Liam," she announced softly before pushing the door open.

Inside, she found Liam—already awake. He was in the middle of a workout, his bare upper body glistening with sweat, muscles tense as he moved rhythmically.

"...198, 199, 200," Liam counted breathlessly, finishing his set of sit-ups. His attention shifted to Ane, who stood by the door, quietly observing him with her usual composed demeanor.

"Good morning, Ane," Liam greeted her, pushing himself off the floor and standing upright.

"Good morning, Liam," she replied, her voice calm yet carrying a note of warmth. "You seem... energetic today."

Liam wiped the sweat from his brow, his expression still as neutral as ever. "Not really. I just got bored sitting around doing nothing," he said, stretching out his arms.

Ane smiled slightly. "I see. Well, I'm here to assist you in getting ready for your day at the young mistress' school. Elsie is quite excited, as you can imagine."

Liam nodded, the mention of Elsie bringing back the memories of last night's conversation. "I'm ready whenever you are."

"Very well," Ane said, gesturing toward a door near the corner of the room. "The washing room is through there. Please take your time. I'll prepare your clothing for the day."

Liam glanced toward the door before thanking her with a simple nod. "Thank you."

Without further words, he made his way to the washing room. The quiet click of the door closing behind him left Ane alone in the room, where she began to lay out the clothes Liam would wear to the school—a plain yet well-tailored outfit that Dain had selected.

Simple, functional, but of fine quality. She moved with practiced precision, smoothing out the fabric and ensuring everything was in order.

Inside the washing room, Liam let the cold water rush over him, the sensation both refreshing and grounding.

It had been a long time since he'd experienced the luxury of a proper bath, having spent years in the wild, washing in murky streams or not at all. The feel of the clean water against his skin was something he wasn't sure he could ever get used to again.

As the water flowed over him, he couldn't help but let his thoughts wander. The Silverhart household was a world apart from what he had known—the warmth, the hospitality, the comforts of everyday life. It felt almost... unnatural.

And yet, there was something about this place that made him feel like he wasn't just a guest, but someone they genuinely cared for. That feeling tugged at something deep within him, something he wasn't sure he was ready to acknowledge.

After what felt like an eternity, Liam stepped out of the bath, drying himself off with the towels provided. He quickly dressed the lower half of his body but left his upper half exposed as he returned to the room.

His movements were casual, his expression unreadable, but as he walked back in, he noticed Ane still standing exactly where she had been, her hands folded neatly in front of her.

This time, there was no embarrassment on Liam's part. He had grown used to the raw necessities of survival in the forest, where modesty was a luxury he couldn't afford. His time in Kyrell had hardened him to things that might have once made him uncomfortable.

Ane, on her part, showed no reaction to his state of undress. Her professionalism never faltered. "Your clothing is ready," she said smoothly, gesturing to the neatly laid-out outfit on the bed. "I trust it will be to your liking."

Liam glanced at the clothes—soft, clean, perfectly arranged. The fabric was finer than anything he had worn in years. He walked over to inspect it, his fingers brushing against the material. "This will do," he said simply.

As Liam dressed, Ane remained respectfully silent. When he was finally clothed, she spoke again. "The young mistress is eager to show you around the academy. She'll be waiting for you in the courtyard once you're ready to depart."

Liam, now dressed in the fresh clothes, nodded in acknowledgment. He wasn't particularly looking forward to the attention he would receive at the school, but there was a part of him that was curious.

The opportunity to learn more about magic—especially about Aetherion —was too valuable to pass up.

As he finished adjusting his sleeves, a question popped into his mind. "Ane," he began, "how much do you know about magic? Specifically, the deeper arts that can help someone attain boundless power?"

Ane's brow lifted slightly, surprised by the directness of his question. But, ever composed, she answered thoughtfully.

"I'm no expert in magical arts, but I've heard whispers of such things. Magic which help people ascend to greater heights is... rare, even among those who dedicate their lives to magic. It is said to be a state beyond the ordinary flow of myst—a step toward becoming something greater, something almost... divine."

Liam absorbed her words carefully. He had suspected as much, but hearing it from someone else made it all the more real. "And the academy... do they teach anything about it?"

Ane's gaze lingered on Liam for a moment, her expression unreadable. "The academy teaches many things, but knowledge of such magic... that is something you will have to seek out yourself. It's not commonly spoken of, not even in a place like that."

Liam nodded. He had expected no less. "Thank you," he said.

Ane gave a small bow, acknowledging his gratitude. "Of course. If there is anything else you need, I will be here."

With that, she turned to leave, but before exiting, she cast one final glance at him. "Good luck today, Liam," she said softly, her tone almost gentle. "And remember, you're not alone in this place."

Once she was gone, Liam stood in the center of the room, feeling the weight of her words settle over him. Not alone... It was a strange thought, after years of solitude and survival. But as he prepared to leave for the academy, he couldn't shake the feeling that maybe—just maybe—there was truth to it.

He took a deep breath, his resolve hardening. Today would be the first step toward something new. Something greater. He would find the answers he sought, no matter how long it took.

With that, he exited the room, ready to face whatever awaited him at the academy.

As Liam approached the courtyard, his mind continued to wander, thoughts swirling around the mysteries of Aetherion.

'If it's not something tied only to the Dark Forest, then surely the academy must have some knowledge of it. High authorities... those in power must know. I need to figure this out, no matter what.'

His thoughts were interrupted when he spotted Elsie and Dr. Dain standing beside a carriage, the morning sun casting long shadows across the cobblestone courtyard.

"Hello, Liam!" Elsie waved energetically as he drew nearer, her smile bright as always.

"Good morning, Elsie," Liam greeted with a nod before turning to Dain. "Dr. Dain."

"Good morning, Liam," Dain replied, his tone calm as ever. "Ready for today?"

Liam straightened his posture slightly. "I believe I am."

"Good," Dain said approvingly. "I won't be coming with you to the academy, but I've already spoken to the principal. They're prepared to welcome a new student today, should you choose to join them."

"Thank you," Liam said, his gratitude genuine, though the weight of Dain's words hung over him. This decision felt monumental but in Liam's mind he has already approved going to the school to learn.

Dain waved off the thanks with a small smile. "There's no need for that. Just remember, you're not obligated to join if you're not comfortable. Today is about seeing the academy and meeting the students. If you don't feel it's the right fit, don't hesitate to tell me."

Liam nodded, appreciating the flexibility. "I understand, sir. Thank you."

With that, Dain stepped aside, allowing Elsie and Liam to board the carriage. The driver tipped his hat in greeting before urging the horses forward with a soft command. The wheels creaked as they rolled over the cobbled street, the city gradually coming to life around them.

As the carriage picked up pace, Elsie turned to Liam, her curiosity evident. "So, how do you feel about today? Excited? Nervous?"

Liam leaned back in his seat, glancing out the window at the passing shops and bustling streets. "I wouldn't say excited... but I'm curious. There's a lot I want to learn."

Elsie gave a thoughtful nod, resting her chin on her hand. "I'm sure you'll like it. The academy is a bit overwhelming at first, but once you find your place, it feels like home. Plus, you'll get to meet all kinds of people—some of them are really strong, too."

Liam's interest piqued at that. "Strong? In terms of magic?"

"Yes, exactly," Elsie replied, her eyes lighting up. "There are students who specialize in all kinds of myst arts. Some are really talented. It's impressive to watch them in action."

Liam's thoughts drifted back to Transcendence. Maybe there are people here who know more than I do... "What about the teachers?" he asked. "Are they powerful?"

"Some of them, yes," Elsie said. "Especially the ones who specialize in advanced magic. I've heard stories about the principal, too. They say he's one of the strongest in the region."

That caught Liam's attention. "The principal? Do you know anything about his magic?"

Elsie shrugged. "Not much, just rumors. But if anyone knows about things above the teachers, it would probably be him."

Liam filed that information away, the gears in his mind turning. 'The principal might just be a source of the information I need...'

As they spoke, the carriage began to slow. Liam glanced out the window to see the grand silhouette of the academy looming ahead.

It was larger than he had imagined, with towering spires and high stone walls covered in ivy. The building had an air of ancient knowledge, its architecture both majestic and imposing. Wide, arched gates stood open, welcoming students and faculty as they entered.

The exterior of the school was a blend of beauty and strength. Stone pathways led through lush gardens, and tall trees lined the courtyard where students gathered.

In the distance, Liam could see a large fountain at the center of the grounds, its water sparkling in the morning light. Beyond that, the tall, glass-paned windows of the academy reflected the blue sky, giving the place a sense of openness despite its grandeur.

Elsie nudged him gently. "What do you think? Impressive, right?"

Liam nodded slowly, taking it all in. "It's... bigger than I expected."

As the carriage came to a halt, the driver stepped down, opening the door for them. Elsie hopped out eagerly, gesturing for Liam to follow. "Come on, let's go see what it's all about."

Liam took a deep breath, stepping out of the carriage and onto the grounds of the academy. The day was just beginning, but it felt like the first step toward something far greater than he had imagined.