

ShadowBound 196

Chapter 196: A Favor

Liam reappeared in Ariana's room, the lingering myst energy of the portal fading around him like dissolving embers. His gaze swept across the space, quickly taking note of Ariana seated at her study table, immersed in a book.

His eyes then shifted toward the bed, where Nyxie was sprawled out, happily swiping at a ball of yarn. Her sleek tail flicked lazily, and her glowing blue eyes gleamed with playful focus as she batted the ball back and forth between her claws.

Liam exhaled softly before speaking. "Enjoying yourself?"

Nyxie's ears twitched at the sound of his voice. She froze mid-swat, blinking at him innocently—then promptly resumed her game, completely unbothered.

Ariana, finally noticing his presence, turned her head slightly. "You're back already?" she asked, marking her page before closing the book.

Liam gave a small nod. "Got what I needed."

Ariana smiled lightly before glancing at Nyxie. "She's been well-behaved. I doubt anyone outside noticed anything unusual."

Liam remained silent for a second, watching as Nyxie tangled herself further in the yarn. "That's good."

He slowly moved toward the bed, crouching in front of it with a calm but intent expression.

"Nyxie," he said, his voice quieter now, "there's something I need to ask of you."

Nyxie paused her swatting and looked at him. Unlike the times when she could sense his irritation or restraint, this time, she felt something different—gentleness.

The ball of yarn was forgotten. Sensing that Liam truly wanted her attention, Nyxie moved closer, crouching on the edge of the bed as she gazed at him curiously.

"You and I are growing stronger," Liam began, "but that also means we have to be careful. My dark magic isn't welcome in this world."

Nyxie tilted her head, listening.

"What I'm trying to say is... you need to stop being so eager to be seen and everywhere at once. If you're caught by the wrong person, you could be killed. And honestly... I don't want that."

His words hung in the air, heavier than usual.

"I know Ariana accepts us for who we are, not just what we are. And there are a few others like her. But not many." His gaze darkened slightly. "I need you to control yourself—to be more cautious. Otherwise, we'll both end up in trouble."

A moment of silence passed.

"Do you understand?" Liam asked. "Can you do that for me?"

Nyxie stared at him for a long second. Even though Liam's face remained impassive as always, she could feel something deeper—a quiet, weary concern.

Then, without hesitation, Nyxie let out a soft chirp before jumping forward and wrapping her small body around Liam in a hug.

Liam, momentarily caught off guard, instinctively caught her in his arms.

"...I guess that's a yes, then," he murmured, returning the hug.

Ariana, who had been silently watching the exchange, found herself surprised. She had seen glimpses of this side of Liam before, but this was different.

Here, in this brief moment, Liam—who so often kept himself walled off—wasn't just showing concern. He was showing care.

And it was Nyxie, his closest companion, who could truly feel it.

'Is it because they're connected as master and familiar?' Ariana wondered. 'Maybe that's why she can sense his emotions, even when he doesn't show them outwardly...'

Then, before she could stop herself, another thought surfaced.

'...It's nice to see him like this. Even if it lasts just for a moment.'

Her gaze softened as she watched Liam hold Nyxie close.

'He looks more...'

A faint blush dusted her cheeks.

'...cute.'

Ariana quickly shook herself from her thoughts, realizing just what she had been thinking.

'Cute?' Her face heated slightly at the ridiculousness of it. 'No, no, no. That's not something I should be thinking about right now!'

She took a quiet breath, trying to calm herself before Liam noticed anything off about her.

Meanwhile, Liam gently placed Nyxie back on the bed. The small creature chirped in protest, clearly wanting to stay attached to him, but Liam gave her a firm look.

Then, turning to Ariana, he asked, "Would you mind keeping Nyxie here for the rest of the day?"

The question snapped Ariana out of her daze entirely. "Huh?"

Liam raised a brow at her reaction, but before he could question it, she quickly responded, "Oh! No, I don't mind. I'll be staying indoors most of the day anyway, except for dinner." She paused for a second before adding, "Lunch won't be an issue either since my assigned assistant brings me food."

Liam gave a small nod, satisfied with the arrangement. "Then I'll leave her here."

Ariana glanced at Nyxie, who was now lounging on the bed, clearly at home. She smiled softly. "She'll be fine with me."

Liam turned to Nyxie. "I'll come for you when the sun starts to set. Stay out of trouble."

Nyxie flicked her tail, tilting her head as if to say Me? Trouble? Never.

Ariana chuckled at the exchange, and Liam simply exhaled before turning toward the door. "Thanks, Ariana," he said before stepping out.

As the door closed behind him, Ariana sat back in her chair, letting out a small sigh.

'Why do I still keep have all these weird thoughts?'

She bit her lip, glancing at Nyxie, who had curled up comfortably on the bed.

Then, almost unconsciously, she touched her warm cheeks, her thoughts drifting back to Liam's rare moment of softness.

'Ugh... what is wrong with me?'

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As Liam entered his room, the door shutting softly behind him, he exhaled, letting the weight of the day settle for a brief moment. Without hesitation, he raised his hand, summoning his magical screen. The faint hum of myst energy filled the air as the translucent interface materialized before him, hovering just in front of his face.

He scanned the selection menu. Now was the time to finalize his choices.

Without delay, he selected:

Primary Courses:

– Elemental Myst Mastery – Specialization: Fire Magic

– Knight Combat Training

Secondary Course:

– Tactical Espionage and Diplomacy

The instant his selections were confirmed, a soft glow spread across the rune marks on his wrist. Then, with a final pulse of myst, they vanished. His schedule materialized on the magical screen, listing each class with precise timing.

Liam Hunter's Course Schedule

Fire Magic (8:00 AM – 10:20 AM) (2h 20m)

– Theory Class: Professor Orin Vale

– Practice Sessions: Instructor Rosalind Emberhart

Knight Combat Training (10:25 AM – 12:45 PM) (2h 20m)

– Instructors: Darius Flint, Vance Holloway, Garrick Stroud Experience tales at

Tactical Espionage and Diplomacy (1:45 PM – 4:00 PM) (2h 15m)

– Theory Class & Practice Sessions: Lady Seraphina Vale & Professor Veylan Kaine

Liam's gaze lingered on the names. He committed them to memory, but still, he reached for a notebook from his desk, flipping to a fresh page and carefully jotting them down.

As he scanned over the schedule, his mind quickly broke down the structure of the day.

Five minutes to transition between classes. That was standard, though it wasn't much time if the lecture halls were spread out. He'd need to map out the academy grounds once classes start again. Then there was the lunch break—a full 50 minutes—which meant enough time to eat and maybe fit in some light training or recon work.

His fingers tapped idly on the table as he considered his last selection.

Tactical Espionage and Diplomacy.

Of all the courses, this was the most uncertain. He knew Mystica had only given him a partial truth. He could tell she left out details on purpose, expecting him to uncover them himself. That alone made him curious.

And then there was the instructor.

Seraphina Vale...

A name he hadn't heard before, but for some reason his guts told him to be prepared.

Liam closed his notebook, setting it back on his desk. He had done enough thinking. His decisions were made.

He turned toward the weapon stand near the door, where his sheathed sword rested against the polished wooden frame. Without hesitation, he grabbed it, fastening the strap securely around his waist before stepping out.

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Later that day, a carriage rumbled down the darkened streets of the night, its wheels creaking as the night air pressed in, the world outside blurred beneath a veil of mist. Inside, Seraphina gazed out of the window, her expression unreadable, while Veylan sat across from her, his silence filling the space between them.

"I heard this year's first years are particularly talented," Seraphina mused, her voice carrying a playful edge. "More potential than usual."

Veylan's gaze flicked to her, but he said nothing, his expression stoic.

A soft chuckle escaped her lips as she leaned back against the seat, her fingers tracing the rim of her glass. "I do hope they last longer than the others. It would be such a shame if they all broke so easily. I've been craving something a little more... challenging."

Veylan's lips twitched, but he didn't speak. The atmosphere between them remained charged, his cool demeanor a contrast to her eager, almost predatory excitement.

"Their resilience, or lack of it, will be so... entertaining," Seraphina continued with a smile that was both chilling and delighted. "I'm looking forward to seeing how far they'll go before they finally crack."