

ShadowBound 24

Chapter 24: I'm Slowly Getting There

Weeks had passed since Liam began his rigorous training with Crimson Breathing, and his progress had been nothing short of remarkable.

From barely managing to maintain the Ignition Phase for a mere five minutes, he could now sustain it for nearly thirty minutes, a testament to his unwavering determination and relentless effort.

The journey to reach this point had been anything but easy. Each day, he pushed his body beyond its limits, enduring the searing pain in his lungs and the exhaustion that threatened to overwhelm him.

But as time went on, Liam began to adapt, his body growing more accustomed to the demands of the technique. The sharp, burning pain that once tore through him each time the Ignition Phase ended had gradually dulled, becoming more bearable with each session.

With this newfound endurance, Liam's combat abilities saw significant improvement. His movements became swifter, his strikes more precise and fluid. Each step he took in the Ignition Phase felt lighter, more controlled, as if he had shed the weight of his limitations.

He trained relentlessly, refining every movement until it became second nature. Yet, even as he focused on mastering Crimson Breathing, he knew he couldn't neglect his magical training.

Despite his initial decision to avoid using Crimson Breathing to enhance his spells and techniques, Liam couldn't ignore the importance of maintaining a balance between his physical prowess and magical aptitude.

He began dedicating a portion of his time to studying various tomes on common and reliable spells, memorizing each incantation, and visualizing how they would weave into his combat style. Though he refrained from casting them, he replayed every step in his mind, allowing the knowledge to settle into his bones.

One evening, he decided to test his progress further. Entering the Ignition Phase, he summoned a small flicker of flame, letting it dance on his fingertips. The warmth was familiar, comforting even, but he knew this was only the beginning.

With careful control, he began to manipulate the flame, allowing it to grow in size, intensity, and form. Unlike before, his energy didn't wane immediately, and he found himself capable of maintaining the flame's shape without succumbing to fatigue.

He started small, conjuring just enough heat to illuminate the training room, testing his control over its intensity and duration. Each day, he pushed a little further, allowing the flames to burn brighter, hotter, until they obeyed his every command.

It was a delicate balance — maintaining the Ignition Phase while channeling his flames — but Liam persisted, learning to wield both without draining himself entirely.

As the month drew to a close, Liam had not only mastered the Ignition Phase but had surpassed his initial expectations. He could now maintain it effortlessly for a solid thirty-five minutes, his body more resilient, his spirit unyielding.

Each heartbeat, each breath, felt in sync with the rhythm of Crimson Breathing, as if the technique had become a part of him.

"Now that I've finally mastered the first stage of Crimson Breathing, it's time to move on to the second," Liam murmured to himself in his room, his voice tinged with both anticipation and caution. He paused, staring at his reflection in the dimly lit mirror, beads of sweat still clinging to his forehead from the intense training.

"...But," he sighed, shaking his head. "That would be reckless. My body's been pushed to its limits already — I need to let it recover before I dive into the next stage."

Though every fiber of his being urged him to press on, he knew all too well the consequences of pushing too hard, too fast.

He was already racing against time, attempting to master a technique that normally took years to perfect in just six months. But if he drove himself into the ground now, all his progress, all the pain, sweat, and sacrifice, would be for nothing.

And so, as the new month began, Liam made a difficult but necessary choice. He allowed his body to rest, dedicating the next three days to recovery instead of training.

It wasn't easy — each day felt like a test of his patience, an agonizing reminder that time was slipping through his fingers. But he knew that if he broke now, it would mean the end of everything he'd worked for.

During this time, he focused on light exercises, meditation, and honing his mind, allowing his body to heal and regain its strength.

He studied more about Crimson Breathing and visualized the movements, preparing himself mentally for the challenges that awaited him. It wasn't wasted time — it was preparation, a calm before the storm.

While Liam allowed his body to recover over the next three days, the atmosphere at school had shifted in subtle but noticeable ways. The students buzzed with hushed whispers and side glances, unaware that beneath the surface of their everyday routines, a quiet storm was brewing. And at the eye of this storm stood Elsie.

For the past month, Elsie had been dealing with an unpleasant reality: she was being bullied by a group of triplets, two males and one female. The siblings were notorious troublemakers, though their behavior had always flown under the radar of the teachers.

They were the kind who picked their victims carefully, choosing those they thought would be too afraid to speak up or fight back. Elsie, unfortunately, had become their target.

The triplets were known as Ethan, Evan, and Eliza Holloway. Ethan, the eldest by a mere two minutes, was the tallest and often led their little gang with an air of arrogance, his posture always exuding the confidence of someone who'd never been challenged in his life.

Evan, slightly shorter, possessed a more wiry frame but made up for it with a cruel sense of humor and sharp wit, his smirk ever-present as if he found everything around him amusing.

And then there was Eliza, the youngest by a few minutes, whose sweet, angelic appearance masked a cunning mind and a twisted sense of enjoyment in tormenting others.

Together, they were like a well-rehearsed act — always in sync, always knowing the exact buttons to press to get under someone's skin.

For weeks now, they had been tormenting Elsie in ways that grew increasingly bold. It started with snide remarks and teasing —about her clothes, her hair, the way she carried herself.

"Oh, look, it's the little doctor's girl," Eliza would sneer, tossing her hair back. "Think you're better than us just because your daddy fixes people?"

When the verbal jabs didn't get a reaction, they escalated. Tripping her in the hallway, hiding her belongings, or spilling ink on her desk just as class started.

It was always something small enough to go unnoticed by others but enough to chip away at Elsie's sense of safety and peace. And yet, despite everything, Elsie kept it all to herself, refusing to tell anyone. Not her teachers, not her friends, not even her father, Dr. Dain. She endured it all in silence.

Why? Perhaps it was because she didn't want to be seen as weak or incapable of handling her own problems. Or maybe, deep down, she feared that speaking up would only make things worse. She'd always been the type to shoulder burdens quietly, to face her challenges alone rather than burdening others with her struggles.

Today, however, things took a different turn.

Elsie stood in the school courtyard, trying to enjoy her lunch in peace, when she felt a shadow fall over her. She glanced up to see Ethan standing before her, flanked by his siblings. The look on his face was different today — more serious, less amused. It sent a chill down her spine.

"We need to talk," Ethan said, his voice carrying that eerie calmness that always made her uneasy.

"I have nothing to say to you," Elsie replied, keeping her voice steady as she tried to brush past him.

Ethan didn't budge. "You do now." He leaned in closer, his eyes narrowing. "Meet us behind the old storage shed after school. Don't keep us waiting."

Evan gave her a crooked smile. "You wouldn't want us to come looking for you, would you?" he taunted, his tone dripping with menace.

Eliza chimed in, feigning concern. "We just want to talk, Elsie. Promise it won't take long." Her voice was sickeningly sweet, but her eyes held that familiar glint that made Elsie's stomach twist.

Elsie clenched her fists, feeling a surge of anger and fear rise within her, but she knew better than to react. That was what they wanted. They fed off of reactions, thrived on the fear they instilled in others. So instead, she took a deep breath and met Ethan's gaze.

"Fine," she said, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "I'll be there."

Satisfied, the triplets exchanged knowing glances before turning away, their laughter echoing through the courtyard as they walked off. Elsie stood there for a moment, taking a shaky breath as she watched them disappear around the corner.

A part of her wanted to run, to hide, to tell someone — anyone — about what was happening. But as always, she pushed those thoughts aside and steeled herself.

After school, Elsie found herself making her way toward the old storage shed on the far side of the campus, the place where the triplets had told her to meet them.

It was a secluded spot, far enough from the main school building that it was often forgotten, overgrown with ivy and surrounded by tall, unkempt grass. The sun was beginning to dip below the horizon, casting long shadows that made the area feel even more isolated.

Elsie's heart pounded in her chest as she approached, but she kept her expression calm, refusing to show any fear. She spotted the triplets already there, leaning casually against the shed with matching smug expressions as if they owned the place.

Ethan stood at the front, his arms crossed over his chest, with Evan and Eliza flanking him on either side.

"You actually came," Ethan sneered, pushing himself off the wall and taking a step toward her. "I was half expecting you to run off like a coward."

Elsie met his gaze, her jaw clenched. "I'm here. What do you want?"

Ethan smirked, glancing back at his siblings. "What do we want? Isn't that the question?" He stepped closer, his presence looming over her.

"You've been acting high and mighty lately, Elsie. Walking around with that stuck-up attitude just because your father's a big-shot doctor. Thinking you're better than everyone else."

"That's not true," Elsie replied firmly, though she could feel her heart racing faster. "I've never thought that."

Evan chuckled, shaking his head. "There it is, that holier-than-thou tone," he mocked. "Always trying to act so perfect. It's really annoying, you know?"

Eliza stepped forward, tilting her head to the side as she examined Elsie, her eyes narrowing. "Why do you never fight back? You just stand there and take it. Are you that pathetic?"

She reached out, her fingers brushing against Elsie's hair before yanking it harshly. "Where's that fire, huh?"

Elsie winced but didn't move away. She'd endured this for long enough. She was tired of letting them push her around.

"Is this really what you want?" she said, her voice shaking but defiant. "To make yourselves feel powerful by bullying someone else? Does that make you feel strong?"

Ethan's smile faded, replaced by a look of irritation. "Watch your mouth, Elsie. You're not in a position to lecture us."

Elsie didn't back down. "Why not? It's the truth, isn't it? You pick on others because you're insecure, because you're too afraid to face your own weaknesses!"

For a moment, silence hung in the air, and then something in Ethan's expression shifted. The irritation turned into anger, a flash of heat igniting in his eyes.

"You think you're so clever, don't you?" he snarled, taking a step back and raising his hand. "Let's see how clever you are when you're burned."

Before Elsie could react, flames began to flicker at Ethan's fingertips, growing and swirling into a small orb of fire that hovered just above his palm.

He stared at her with an intensity that sent a shiver down her spine, his anger tangible in the air. "Maybe this will teach you to keep your mouth shut."

Elsie's heart skipped a beat, and for the first time, real fear took hold of her. She stepped back, her eyes wide, but Ethan was already moving his arm back, ready to hurl the burning orb at her.

The air around them grew hotter, and she could feel the heat licking at her skin even from that distance.

And then, in an instant, the heat vanished.

Ethan froze, his eyes widening as a shadow fell over him. Before he could react, a cold voice cut through the air, sharp and commanding.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

The triplets turned to see Liam standing a few feet away, his expression unreadable, eyes cold as ice. There was something about the way he stood, the calmness in his posture, that sent a ripple of unease

through them. It was as if he'd always been there, silently watching, waiting for the right moment to intervene.

"What the..." Ethan started, but Liam's gaze locked onto him, stopping him mid-sentence. It was as if Liam's very presence was suffocating, an invisible weight pressing down on Ethan's shoulders, making it hard to breathe.

Liam stepped closer, his voice low and chilling. "You lay a finger on her, and I'll make you regret it." He didn't raise his voice; he didn't need to. The sheer intensity of his words carried all the weight of a promise — a promise Ethan knew, deep down, that Liam would keep.

The orb of fire flickered, then died out in Ethan's hand. For the first time in his life, Ethan Holloway found himself speechless, staring into the eyes of someone who wasn't afraid of him.