

ShadowBound 26

Chapter 26: One Step Toward Success

Liam and Elsie finally returned home. The carriage ride had been mostly silent, with Elsie keeping her head down and Liam gazing out the window, seemingly unbothered by the day's events.

The tension that clung to Elsie was unmistakable, but Liam showed no sign of probing into it. He remained his usual calm self, detached and stoic.

As the evening went on, the sun dipped below the horizon, casting the house in a gentle, warm glow. Dinner came and went, but unlike her usual self, Elsie was mostly quiet, only making small attempts to fill the silence with forced conversation.

Liam didn't press her, choosing instead to focus on his meal, nodding occasionally but never initiating any topics.

Later that night, as the house fell into a deep, tranquil silence, Liam began his usual routine. Over the past weeks, he had developed a habit of training late into the night, using the stillness to refine his skills undisturbed.

Tonight was special; his rest days were over, and it was finally time to begin the second stage of Crimson Breathing.

As he prepared to slip out of his room, there was a knock on the door. He paused, momentarily surprised. 'Who would be awake at this hour?' he thought.

He walked over and opened it, revealing Elsie standing there, looking slightly flustered, her hands nervously clutching the hem of her nightgown.

"Hey, Liam... were you going somewhere?" Elsie asked, her voice tinged with a mix of hesitation and curiosity.

"I was heading out to train," Liam replied, his tone even and indifferent.

"Oh," Elsie said, seeming to shrink a bit. "Then... maybe I should leave this for later."

"You can say whatever you need to say now," Liam responded, shrugging. "Just make it quick. I don't have much time."

Elsie nodded and stepped inside, her cheeks faintly pink. Liam gestured for her to sit on the edge of his bed, and she complied, sitting with her back straight, clearly nervous. He remained standing, leaning against the wall, arms crossed as he waited.

"So, what did you want to talk about?" Liam finally asked, breaking the silence.

"I... I wanted to say thank you," Elsie began, her voice almost a whisper. "For what you did today... with the triplets."

Liam's expression remained unreadable, his eyes focused but distant. "Is that all?" he asked bluntly.

"Well... there's more," Elsie admitted, fidgeting with her fingers. "The truth is, they've been bothering me for a while now. I just... I didn't tell anyone. I thought I could handle it on my own, but... today made me realize I can't."

Liam let out a soft sigh, pushing himself off the wall. "Elsie, I understand why you're telling me this," he began, his voice low and firm, "but the best people to talk to about something like this are your parents.

They'll know how to handle it better than I ever could. They'll give you the support and guidance you need."

He paused, looking her directly in the eyes, and continued, "As for the triplets, don't worry about them coming after me. I can handle myself."

There was an edge to his voice, something unyielding and resolute, like a blade drawn from its sheath. "If they become a problem, I'll deal with them."

His words were simple, yet they carried a weight that made Elsie feel both reassured and frustrated at the same time.

"If that's everything you wanted to talk about, I'll be going now," Liam said, turning towards the door. "And please, close the door gently when you leave."

With that, Liam stepped out, disappearing into the shadows of the hallway, leaving Elsie alone in his room. She let out a heavy sigh and collapsed backward onto his bed, burying her face into his pillow.

"Why does he have to be so cool and frustrating at the same time?" she groaned into the fabric, her voice muffled.

Rolling over, she stared at the ceiling, a small smile playing on her lips despite herself. "But... I guess he's right," she murmured. "I'll talk to Mom or Dad about it... maybe they'll know what to do."

With that thought in mind, she stood up, casting one last glance around Liam's room before heading to the door. She hesitated for a moment, then smiled.

"Thanks, Liam," she whispered softly, before slipping out and quietly closing the door behind her, just as he had asked.

Liam finally entered the training room, the air was thick with silence, only interrupted by his steady breaths. This was his sanctuary, the place where he could push his limits without any interruptions or distractions. Tonight, he wasn't just training – he was preparing himself for the next stage.

Taking a deep breath, Liam sat in his meditation pose, crossing his legs and placing his hands on his knees. He closed his eyes, letting the world around him fade until all that remained was the steady thump of his heartbeat.

'According to Liora, the Furnace State builds upon the Ignition Phase, but its intensity is far greater,' he thought, replaying her words in his mind. 'It's not just about tapping into the myst but allowing it to surge, to burn with even greater fervor.'

He began by entering the familiar Ignition Phase, allowing the myst within him to stir, heating his core as if kindling a small flame.

The warmth spread through his limbs, wrapping him in a comfortable embrace. But this was just the start. He had to go beyond, to push past the gentle warmth into something fiercer.

Minutes passed, and beads of sweat formed on his forehead, his muscles tensing as he tried to coax his myst to respond. The room grew colder around him as if the air itself was being drawn toward the heat building within him.

He could feel the myst swirling, eager to erupt but held back by his control. It wasn't easy; each breath felt like inhaling fire, every exhale laced with embers. But that discomfort was proof that he was getting closer.

'Furnace State...' Liam focused, imagining the flames intensifying, feeding off the air, and roaring to life. His breathing became more deliberate, each inhale drawing in more myst, each exhale expelling impurities.

He could feel the shift, a sudden surge as the warmth evolved into a searing heat that spread from his core to every part of his body. It felt like molten lava was coursing through his veins, an intense, almost unbearable heat that threatened to overwhelm him.

Then, all at once, he felt it – a sudden, intense burst. His eyes snapped open, and his body ignited with a crimson aura, wisps of red myst swirling around him like a small inferno.

He stood slowly, feeling the strength in his limbs, the power thrumming beneath his skin. He had done it. He had entered the Furnace State.

Breathing deeply, he took a moment to assess the flow of myst coursing through him, comparing it to when he was in the Ignition Phase. It was wilder, less forgiving, but there was an unmistakable potency to it.

The energy didn't just radiate outward; it pulsed, as if every heartbeat fueled the flames that danced around him. There was an intense pressure now, a heaviness that demanded his full focus to control.

'It's stronger... far stronger,' Liam thought, marveling at the raw power. 'But it's also less forgiving. One wrong move, and I'll burn myself from the inside out.'

He extended his hand, summoning a small flame into his palm. The fire danced, brighter and more vibrant than ever before, responding eagerly to his will. He manipulated it, watching as it shifted from a flickering ember to a steady blaze, testing the limits of his control.

Unlike in the Ignition Phase, where the flames were gentle and easy to guide, the Furnace State demanded constant attention. It was as if the fire had a will of its own, challenging him to maintain mastery over it.

Pushing himself further, he attempted more complex maneuvers, weaving the flames between his fingers, shaping them into small orbs that hovered in the air. He felt an intoxicating surge of power, an overwhelming sense of potential.

'This... this is incredible,' he thought, unable to suppress a slight smile. But even as he relished this newfound strength, he could feel the heat creeping into his skin, the slow, insidious burn that warned him of the Furnace State's cost.

His breathing grew ragged, sweat pouring down his face, and he could feel the heat beginning to blister his skin from within. Every movement sent jolts of pain through him, a reminder that this power wasn't without its price.

He clenched his teeth, refusing to let the pain break his concentration. 'I need to push through... just a little longer,' he told himself, his resolve unwavering.

With one final effort, he drew the flames back into himself, forcing them to calm, to obey. His aura dimmed, and the burning sensation subsided, leaving him standing there, breathing heavily, but victorious.

He had managed to control the Furnace State, albeit barely. But the experience had made one thing clear – this new stage was not something to be taken lightly.

"That's enough for tonight," Liam muttered, looking down at his trembling hands, the faint scorch marks already beginning to fade. "But it's a start."