

ShadowBound 29

Chapter 29: I Need To Prepare

Mastering Flare Burst had proven to be the most grueling challenge Liam had faced yet. Unlike Ignition Phase and Furnace State, which he had managed to sustain for a respectable thirty minutes, the intensity of Flare Burst was on an entirely different level.

As the month dwindled away, Liam had only just managed to extend his time in that stage to a mere three minutes. Despite this, he felt a sense of accomplishment. He knew that once he achieved Crimson Overdrive, the time limitations and strain from the individual stages would become trivial.

But for now, he had another pressing matter—obtaining the Emberflower. According to Alice, it could be found near the outskirts of Nystra City, right at the border of Zone 14.

However, Liam was still a stranger to Nystra, having spent most of his time between the school and the Silverhart residence. If he wanted to venture out for this rare flower, he'd need to familiarize himself with the city's layout first. And is where better to start than the library?

As Liam entered the library, he noticed the librarian wasn't at her desk—a rare sight. He paid little attention to that, his focus set on finding Alice in her usual spot. As he approached, he spotted Alice sitting there, deep in conversation with a familiar face.

"Hey there," Liam greeted, his voice cutting through the stillness.

Alice and Elsie turned toward him, both looking surprised. Elsie's eyes widened, momentarily taken aback. "Oh, hey, Liam! What are you doing here?" she asked, her tone curious.

"I'm here to talk with Alice," Liam replied, shifting his gaze to Alice with a hint of familiarity that made Elsie's heart flutter in surprise.

"Heya, Liam," Alice responded with a smile that seemed to light up her face.

Liam offered a small smile back. "Reading as always, I see."

Elsie, who had been quietly observing, finally spoke up, her voice tinged with curiosity. "Do you two know each other?"

"Yep! I've been helping Liam with some stuff," Alice said nonchalantly, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Stuff?" Elsie's mind went into overdrive, imagination conjuring all sorts of scenarios.

"That's true," Liam confirmed casually. "And, well, I kind of need your help again today."

"Oh, sure! What do you need?" Alice asked, her enthusiasm shining through.

"I've been living here in Nystra for nearly three months, but I still don't really know my way around," Liam admitted. "I was hoping you two could help me with that."

Alice's face lit up. "We'd love to show you around! Right, Elsie?"

Elsie nodded eagerly. "Yeah! We can take you to all the best spots."

Liam, however, shook his head gently, an amused smile tugging at his lips. "Actually, that's not quite what I had in mind."

Both girls exchanged a glance, their brows furrowing in confusion. "Then what do you mean?" Alice asked.

"Maybe you could show me the city on a map instead," Liam clarified.

Alice's eyes brightened with understanding. "Oh, got it! That makes sense. I've got just the map for this." She sprang to her feet and hurried over to a shelf filled with scrolls, rifling through them before returning triumphantly with a rolled-up map. "Here it is!"

Unrolling it across the table, the map of Zone Thirteen spread out before them. Elsie's eyes went wide with wonder, her fingers lightly tracing over the parchment.

"This is amazing," she breathed. "But aren't the drawings and writings kind of small?" Liam asked, scrutinizing the intricate details.

Alice's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Watch this." She tapped her index finger on a particular section, and suddenly, the map began to shift and zoom in on that region, the details growing larger and clearer as if it were a living, breathing thing.

"Wow! I've never seen anything like this!" Elsie exclaimed, her excitement bubbling over. "Look, Liam! There's our house, right there!"

"Your house looks beautiful," Alice chimed in, genuinely impressed.

"This is Nystra City, right?" Elsie asked, her finger lingering over the intricate streets and alleys.

"Yep, you got it," Alice confirmed, clearly delighted by Elsie's reaction.

Liam remained silent, studying the map with growing interest. He had seen many things in his journey, but nothing quite like this. There was something magical about it, a tool that combined precision and wonder, almost as if the map itself wanted to guide him.

"Alright," Alice said, her tone becoming more focused. "Where should we start?"

The next hour was spent exploring every nook and cranny of Nystra City through the map, with Alice and Elsie eagerly pointing out landmarks, shortcuts, and hidden gems. As Liam listened, he absorbed every detail, committing it all to memory.

As Liam wandered the Silverhart courtyard, deep in thought, he mulled over the logistics of his journey to the outskirts of Nystra City. Now that he knew his destination lay west, he had to figure out the means to get there. His eyes drifted to the horses tethered near the stables, their hooves shuffling lazily against the cobblestone.

"Perhaps I could use one of these," Liam muttered to himself, watching one of the horses flick its ears. "No... they'd probably tire out before I even reached the outskirts."

Just then, Mila emerged from the nearby garden, a light smile on her face as she noticed where his attention was focused. "You seem captivated by the horses," she remarked, her tone warm and teasing.

Liam straightened, shaking his head slightly. "Not captivated. Just... thinking," he replied, trying to play it off. "I was considering whether they'd be good for long journeys."

Mila approached, folding her arms thoughtfully. "They're strong, but they're not built for extreme distances without rest," she said. "We usually use them for short trips into the city or for hauling supplies."

"Figures," Liam muttered, more to himself than to her.

Mila tilted her head, studying him for a moment. "You've been restless lately," she observed. "Something on your mind?"

Liam hesitated, not wanting to divulge too much. "Just trying to figure some things out," he admitted vaguely.

"Like what?" Mila pressed, her curiosity piqued.

"Well..." Liam rubbed the back of his neck, trying to find a way to divert the topic. "It's nothing important. But what about you? You always seem busy around here. What do you do when you're not working?"

Mila chuckled softly. "Honestly? There's not much free time around here. But when I do get a moment, I like to read. Mostly adventure novels—stories about far-off places and daring heroes. It's nice to escape, even if it's just for a little while."

Her eyes softened as she spoke, as if recalling some cherished memory. "Sometimes I wish I could just travel, leave everything behind, and go on a journey of my own."

"Travel, huh?" Liam repeated thoughtfully. The word resonated with him, sparking a sudden idea.

Mila nodded. "Yeah, I've always dreamed of seeing more of the world. But I suppose that's not in the cards for me right now." She sighed, but it was a gentle, resigned sort of sigh, as if she had long made peace with her circumstances.

Liam's eyes flickered with a newfound determination. "You know... traveling doesn't always have to be difficult," he said, a subtle excitement creeping into his voice. "Sometimes, the journey is less about the distance and more about how you approach it."

Mila raised an eyebrow, sensing the change in his demeanor. "What do you mean?"

He didn't answer her directly. Instead, he took a step back, as if seeing things from a different angle. "Thanks, Mila," Liam said suddenly, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "You've just given me the answer I needed."

"Wait, what? What did I say?" Mila blinked, clearly confused.

"I'll explain later!" Liam called over his shoulder as he took off, sprinting back toward the house with a new sense of urgency.

He left Mila standing there, bewildered but with a small smile on her face, wondering just what kind of idea she had helped him stumble upon.

Back in his room, Liam shut the door and began to pace, his mind racing with the possibility that had struck him. Mila's words about reading and escaping through adventures had reminded him of something essential.

"If I could amplify Resonance using Crimson Breathing... then maybe," Liam thought aloud, the idea suddenly taking root in his mind.

His earlier experiments with Crimson Breathing had always focused on enhancing his own physical capabilities, but if he could channel that energy into his magic, specifically Resonance, he could drastically amplify one of his shadow beasts.

The realization was a breakthrough, one that struck him with surprising clarity. He didn't need to rely on his body to cover the distance swiftly; he needed to tap into the power of his shadows, to draw out their latent potential using Crimson Breathing as the catalyst.

This way, he could travel with enhanced speed and power without exhausting himself before reaching his destination.

A faint smile tugged at the corner of his lips. It was an unorthodox approach but one that carried a calculated risk, and right now, that was his best option.

"If I can boost my shadow beast's strength and speed, I won't have to expend my own stamina," he murmured, feeling the weight of the solution lift off his shoulders.

His thoughts drifted to the limitations of Crimson Breathing. Even staying in the Ignition Phase wore him down, and if he exhausted himself before reaching the outskirts, he'd be defenseless against any threats lurking there.

No, he couldn't afford that mistake. This way, he'd still have his strength and the full force of Crimson Breathing ready should a confrontation arise.

"This is it," he whispered with newfound resolve, his pulse quickening at the thought of testing this combination. Without another moment's hesitation, he pivoted sharply and rushed to the training room, his mind already racing with the steps he'd take to prepare for this new phase of his journey.