

ShadowBound 156

Chapter 156: Making A Home

After trekking for hours through the dense forest, exhaustion clung to the group like a heavy cloak. Their legs dragged with each step, but that weariness quickly evaporated when they stumbled upon a small but wide river shimmering under the dappled sunlight.

"Water!" Edith exclaimed, her voice tinged with relief as she hurried forward.

The others followed close behind, their spirits visibly lifting at the sight of the clear water.

"Oh, thank the gods," Robin said dramatically as he dropped to his knees, cupping his hands to drink. "I thought I was about to shrivel up like a dry leaf."

"It's so clean," Karla marveled, holding the crystalline water in her palms. She tilted her head, admiring how the sunlight refracted through it.

Lucian and Liam arrived last, with Liam trailing a bit farther behind. Everyone drank deeply, washing their faces and letting the cool water refresh them.

But Karla suddenly paused, her expression shifting to one of curiosity. "Wait... do you guys hear that?"

"Hear what?" Lucian asked, wiping his damp face with the back of his hand.

"That sound," Karla replied, her brow furrowing as she focused on the faint roar in the distance. "It sounds like... a waterfall." Her eyes lit up as realization struck. "There's a waterfall nearby!" Without waiting for a response, she stood and began heading toward the sound.

The group exchanged brief glances before following her, too tired to argue but curious enough to comply.

After walking a few meters, they reached the source of the sound—a breathtaking waterfall cascading over a rocky cliff, its powerful flow crashing into the pool below and creating a soft, misty veil that hung in the air.

"Wow, would you look at that," Edith said, her tone a mix of awe and relief as she took in the serene scene.

"This place is stunning," Karla added, spinning in a circle to absorb the view.

"Finally, I can take a break," Lucian sighed as he sat on a nearby stone, rubbing his temples.

"You need it," Edith said, offering him a small smile. "Use Myst Recovery to replenish your reserves. We all should. This is a good place to rest, but we can't stay here when night falls. I wish there was a cave or something nearby." She scanned the surrounding area.

"I can scout ahead and see if there's anything useful," Liam offered, raising a hand slightly.

"Can I tag along?" Karla asked eagerly.

Liam gave her a brief glance and shrugged. "I don't mind."

Edith nodded. "Good idea, but don't go too far. If something happens, we won't be able to help in time."

"Don't worry, Captain," Karla said with a playful salute. "We'll be back before you know it."

"Be careful," Edith added, her tone firm.

"Alright," Liam replied simply, already turning toward the waterfall cliff.

"Wait up, Liam!" Karla called, jogging to catch up to him as the others settled in to rest.

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As the rest of the group rested by the waterfall, Liam and Karla ventured into the forest to survey the area. They moved through the trees, keeping the sound of rushing water behind them as they searched for shelter. About 40 meters away, Liam spotted something amidst the dense foliage.

"There's a cave over there," he said.

"Wow, you have sharp eyes," Karla said, smiling brightly. "I didn't even notice it."

Liam shrugged.

"Should we check it out? I've always wanted to explore a cave," Karla said.

"Sure. I don't have a problem with it."

"Yes!" Karla cheered, doing a small jump of joy before hurrying toward the cave.

The entrance was partially hidden by overgrown vines and rocks, appearing slightly dark.

Liam raised a hand, conjuring a small flame that hovered over his palm, its warm glow illuminating the narrow entrance. Shadows danced across the walls as they stepped inside.

"Creepy," Karla whispered, her voice echoing faintly in the silence. "But also kind of cool, don't you think?"

"If that's what you want to call it," Liam replied, his tone neutral.

The two ventured deeper into the cave, their footsteps muffled by the dirt and loose stones. The air grew cooler, and the scent of damp earth filled their nostrils. After a few minutes, the narrow tunnel opened into a spacious chamber.

The ceiling arched high above them, and the room was large enough to accommodate their group with room to spare. Liam's flame revealed smooth, natural walls with faint streaks of mineral deposits glimmering under the light.

Karla let out a low whistle as she ran her hand along the cool stone. "Wow. This place is perfect. It's roomy and looks pretty safe."

Liam scanned the chamber, stepping further in to examine its structure. "There's no other entrance or exit apart from the one we came through."

"Even better!" Karla said, spinning in place. "This could totally be our little base. The others are going to love it."

"Let's head back and tell them," Liam said, extinguishing the flame in his hand as he turned to leave.

Karla nodded enthusiastically, practically skipping as they retraced their steps back to the waterfall.

When Liam and Karla returned to the riverbank, the group greeted them with expectant expressions.

"Well?" Edith asked, her tone curious.

"We found a cave about 40 meters from here," Liam said. "One entrance, no signs of danger. It's spacious enough for all of us."

Edith's face softened with relief. "That's great news. We'll move once everyone's ready."

"Thanks for scouting it out," Robin added with a nervous smile

Karla gave a playful wink. "No problem! I had the ultimate bodyguard with me, after all."

Liam didn't respond, walking over to the river to scoop some water into his hands, the coolness grounding him.

As the group gathered their belongings and prepared to leave, the sun began to sink below the horizon, casting golden light over the forest. The timing couldn't have been better—they'd found shelter just as night approached.

On their way to the cave, Edith instructed Liam and Robin to gather some tree branches. Karla had mentioned how cold the chamber had been, and they needed wood to start a fire.

Once they reached the cave, Liam conjured a small flame and lit one of the sticks, handing it to Edith to illuminate their path.

"You two were right," Edith said as they entered the spacious chamber. "This place is perfect for us. Great job."

"Thanks, Captain," Karla said with a proud smile.

As the group settled in, Lucian looked around with a thoughtful frown. "We've got shelter, but we've got another problem."

"What now?" Edith asked, already dreading the answer.

"Hunger," Lucian said plainly. "We might have a place to rest, but there's no food."

Edith smirked. "Actually, you're wrong, Lucian. Back at the river, there were plenty of fish. That'll keep us fed for now. I'm guessing you were too busy meditating to notice."

Lucian's cheeks flushed, and he muttered, "Oh. Well...good to know."

Edith chuckled. "No worries. We appreciate the concern, though."

As they began discussing sleeping arrangements, Edith hesitated, glancing around awkwardly. "So...is everyone okay sleeping on the bare floor? Because, uh...I'm not a big fan."

Karla immediately chimed in, laughing. "Thank God you said that first. I didn't want to be the only one complaining."

Robin scratched his head nervously. "I mean, I can manage, but it's not exactly comfortable."

Lucian sighed dramatically. "Fine. I can use my magic to make something like beds. They won't be luxurious, but they'll be better than the cold ground."

"You've done enough for today," Edith began, but Lucian cut her off with an exasperated glare.

"Just shut up and accept the help."

Edith blinked, startled. "O-okay. Thanks."

Lucian rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath as he moved to a spot in the chamber to begin shaping crude beds from compacted earth and stone.

Meanwhile, Liam and Robin stacked the collected branches in the center of the chamber. Liam ignited them with a flick of his fingers, the fire's warmth spreading through the cave.

"Much better," Karla said, stretching her arms toward the flames.

"I'm heading out to get some leaves," Liam announced, already moving toward the cave entrance.

"Leaves? Why?" Edith asked, confused.

"For comfort. There are big leaves near the waterfall. They'll make decent covers."

"I see. Someone should go with—" Edith started but stopped when Liam interrupted.

"No need. I'll handle it."

Before anyone could argue, he walked out of the cave.

Edith watched him go, her brow furrowed. 'That was the first time he's seemed...off. Well not that he gives any other energy, but that seemed a bit off. I wanted to tell him it was dangerous, but I couldn't. I hope he is alright.'

Outside the cave, Liam walked under the fading light of the sunset, the rising moon casting a calm glow over the forest. He inhaled deeply, the cool air soothing his nerves.

'It was getting stifling in there,' he thought, his footsteps crunching softly against the forest floor. 'The leaves were just an excuse to clear my head.'

Stopping at a large tree near the riverbank, Liam noticed its massive leaves and clusters of berries. With a flick of his wrist, he used his magic to propel himself onto a sturdy branch. Carefully, he cut nine large leaves and picked three clusters of berries, inspecting them closely.

'They don't look poisonous. These should be safe to eat,' he thought, pocketing the berries before leaping back to the ground.

With his supplies in hand, Liam began his walk back to the cave.

He returned to the cave with the armful of large leaves and the berries tucked into his side. As he stepped into the dimly lit chamber, the soft crackle of the fire greeted him. Karla was the first to notice his arrival, her face lighting up.

"Liam! You're a lifesaver," Karla exclaimed, rushing over. "Are those berries? Please tell me they're edible!"

"They seem safe," Liam said simply, dropping the leaves onto the ground and holding out the clusters of berries.

Robin approached hesitantly, his nervous hands fumbling together. "T-thank you, Liam. I, uh...I haven't eaten anything since this morning."

Edith joined them, her shoulders visibly relaxing as she grabbed one of the clusters. "This is perfect. Good thinking, Liam." She paused, glancing at the leaves. "And these will make things a bit more comfortable. Nice job."

Karla grabbed one of the berries and tossed it into her mouth without hesitation. "Mmm! They're actually good!" she said, grinning. "Sweet and juicy. Robin, come on, don't just stand there like a scared kitten!"

Robin flushed, fumbling to grab a berry. "I-I'm not scared. Just cautious." He popped one into his mouth and blinked in surprise. "Oh...they are good."

Lucian, who had just finished his work, wiped his hands on his uniform and approached the group. "Well, glad to see you all eating, but can we appreciate my masterpiece for a second?"

The group turned to see the five earthen beds Lucian had created, each spaced widely apart to respect personal boundaries. The beds were simple but functional, raised slightly off the ground with smoothed surfaces that wouldn't cause discomfort.

"Wow," Edith said, walking over to one. "These are...incredible, Lucian. Thank you."

"Yeah, not bad!" Karla chimed in, inspecting another. "Although, did you have to space them so far apart? I'm not that scary to sleep near."

Lucian smirked. "Personal space. You're welcome."

Robin, standing awkwardly near one of the beds, mumbled, "They look great. R-really. Thank you."

Lucian waved off the compliments, scratching the back of his neck. "Don't make a big deal out of it. Just don't complain if they're not soft enough."

As the group settled in, laying down the leaves on the earthen beds for added comfort, the fire's glow filled the chamber with a sense of calm. Karla stretched out on her bed with a satisfied sigh, while Robin carefully positioned himself on his, trying not to make any sudden movements.

However, Liam stood by the entrance, his expression unreadable. Without a word, he turned and walked out of the cave.

"Wait, where's he going again?" Edith called after him, sitting up.

"I'll be keeping watch. Since we don't have proper security," Liam said over his shoulder.

"By yourself? There are demons out there." Karla asked, raising an eyebrow. "And besides, you just got back. Take a break!"

"I'm fine, no need to make a fuss out of this." Liam replied curtly, walking out.

Robin shifted nervously on his bed. "D-do you think he's okay? He doesn't seem like the type to just, uh, walk off..."

Karla leaned back, folding her arms behind her head. "He's probably fine. Liam's got that whole lone wolf vibe, ever since the enrollment trials. He'll be fine."

Edith, however, couldn't shake the feeling that something was off. She sighed but didn't press further, knowing Liam didn't look like the type to listen to persuasion.

Outside, Liam leaned against a tree a short distance from the cave. The forest was quiet, save for the soft rustle of leaves and the distant sound of the waterfall.