

ShadowBound 157

Chapter 157: Day Two: Survival In Vlardia

As the sun rose over the horizon, signaling the start of day two of the students' practical exams, the cave was still cloaked in the quiet stillness of early morning. Edith stirred awake first, her eyes blinking as they adjusted to the dim light filtering in. She sat up, stretching her arms, but her gaze quickly fell on the empty bed next to hers—the one meant for Liam.

"Did he not come back to sleep at all?" she murmured to herself, her brow furrowing.

Not wanting to disturb the others, Edith quietly got to her feet, her bare toes brushing against the cool earthen floor. She made her way to the entrance. Outside, the forest was alive with the gentle rustle of leaves and the melodic chirping of birds. Edith inhaled deeply, the crisp morning air filling her lungs.

Shielding her eyes from the sun's golden rays, she called out, "Liam! Where are you? Liam!" Her voice echoed faintly through the trees as she began walking toward the riverbank.

'If he didn't come back to sleep, did he really stay up all night on watch?' Edith pondered, her brows knitting further. 'That doesn't seem possible. No matter how tough he looks, staying awake for an entire night would wear anyone down.'

Her thoughts grew darker as she walked. "Did he end up fighting a demon? Is he...dead?" she whispered, the mere idea sending a chill through her.

But she shook her head, forcing herself to remember the Headmaster's words. "No one will get injured during the exams. They're monitoring everything. There's no need to panic." A faint smirk crossed her lips as a stray thought crept in. 'Though, how exactly are they watching us for three full days? They'd have to do shifts. Or maybe they have some kind of magical surveillance?'

Edith shook her head again, refocusing on the task at hand. "Anyway, where is that stubborn guy?" she muttered under her breath, annoyance coloring her tone as she approached the riverbank.

Kneeling by the water's edge, she cupped her hands to scoop the cool, clear water to her lips. The crispness of the drink was invigorating. "The water here really is amazing," she murmured, splashing some on her face to wake herself up further.

"Good morning, Captain."

The sudden voice made Edith freeze, her instincts kicking in as she spun around, her hand already half-raised to strike.

But she stopped mid-motion, her breath catching as her eyes landed on Liam. He stood a few paces away, his shirt discarded, leaving his upper body exposed. Water droplets glistened on his toned physique, catching the sunlight as they trickled down his chest and arms. His trousers were rolled up just above his ankles, and his damp hair clung slightly to his forehead.

Edith's hard exterior faltered as her cheeks burned with an uncontrollable blush. She quickly averted her gaze, staring resolutely at the ground as she tried to steady her voice.

"W-where have you been? I-I was looking all over for you," she stammered, struggling to maintain her composure.

"I was near the waterfall," Liam said. "Karla cleaned my uniform with her magic yesterday, but some areas of my body were still dirty, so I decided to wash up properly."

"Oh, I see..." Edith replied, her voice barely above a whisper. She hesitated before glancing back at him, only to catch herself and turn away again. "Wait—you didn't wash in the river, did you?"

Liam raised an eyebrow. "No. The waterfall hits the cliffside at an angle, and there are a few natural pools just beneath it. I used those instead."

As he spoke, he raised a hand, channeling his myst to evaporate the remaining water from his skin. Steam curled around him, dispersing into the air as he stood there.

Edith, on the other hand, felt her face flush even redder. She bit her lip, scolding herself inwardly for her flustered state. "Oh, a-alright. I thought you used the river, that's all," she said, her voice tinged with awkwardness.

But her resolve faltered as she realized she had turned to face him again without thinking. She quickly spun back around, her hands clenching at her sides. 'Get a grip, Edith. He's just another student...a frustrating, stubborn, shirtless student.'

Liam, oblivious to her inner turmoil, tilted his head slightly. "Did you need something, or were you just checking if I died somewhere?"

"N-no! I just..." Edith trailed off, letting out a frustrated sigh. "Never mind. Just...hurry up and get back to the cave. The others will probably be awake soon."

"Understood, Captain," Liam said simply, before retrieving his shirt and slipping it back on.

Edith didn't turn around until she was sure he had walked past her, muttering under her breath, "Stubborn and annoying..."

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Edith and Liam returned to the cave to find the others stirring awake. Karla was already sitting up, stretching and yawning, while Robin blinked sleepily, his face still buried in his arms. Lucian sat cross-legged on his makeshift bed, running a hand through his disheveled hair.

"Morning," Edith greeted.

"Morning," Karla responded brightly, while the boys mumbled something incomprehensible.

"Liam found some natural pools of water just below the waterfall. It seems to be a good place to freshen up," Edith continued, glancing at the others.

Karla perked up at the suggestion. "That's great! Why don't the girls go first, and the boys can go after us?"

Edith nodded, appreciating Karla's practicality. "Works for me. Let's go."

Without further ado, Edith and Karla left the cave, heading toward the riverbank. As they approached the pools Liam had mentioned, Karla marveled at the pristine beauty of the spot, while Edith just quickly got to washing up.

"It's nice to have a moment to clean up," Karla remarked as she ran her fingers through her wet hair. "Can you imagine going three days without washing? Gross."

Edith smirked faintly. "That's the least of my concerns out here. But yeah, it's nice."

Once the girls were done, they returned to the cave, allowing Robin and Lucian to take their turn. The boys approached the pools more awkwardly, with Robin muttering something about how he'd rather be covered in dirt than get cold water dumped on him. Lucian, on the other hand, seemed fascinated by the surroundings, remarking on the natural formations as he rinsed his face and hair.

When everyone was refreshed and ready, Edith called the group together.

"Alright, before we do anything else, I know I said food wasn't problem but, how to get it would be a problem," she began. "So, who here knows how to hunt or catch fish?"

Karla was the first to respond, shaking her head. "Not me. I've never hunted a day in my life, seems pretty barbaric to me. And the closest I've come to fishing is watching someone else do it."

Robin hesitated before speaking up. "I...I know a little about hunting," he said quietly. "My dad taught me when I was a kid, but I stopped when I was eight. After that, my family insisted I focus on learning magic so I could train as a knight."

Lucian shrugged. "I'm as hopeless as Karla. I have no skill or knowledge about all these survival stuff."

Edith's gaze shifted to Liam, who had been silent so far. "What about you?"

Liam gave a small nod. "I can catch fish. My grandpa and I used to do it for fun."

Edith raised an eyebrow, intrigued. "Good to know. As for me, I'm decent at fishing, but my specialty is hunting. That's what my family is known for."

"The Roswells, right?" Karla asked, her curiosity piqued.

Edith nodded. "That's right. My family's been in the meat business for generations. We supply meat and other food products to the Academy and several regions across the eastern side of the continent. Hunting is in our blood, and we're damn good at it." Her voice carried a hint of pride.

"Since it seems like we're split on skills, we'll divide responsibilities. Liam and I will handle catching fish, while the rest of you work on preparing a fire pit and gathering wood. We'll need to eat quickly and move out to cover more ground today.

"And also, Robin... can I borrow your bow and a few arrows?"