

ShadowBound 165

Chapter 165: Reason For My Action

Back in Vlardia, Liam stirred awake from his post-battle exhaustion. Sitting on the edge of his makeshift earthen bed, he scanned the cave. His teammates were sprawled across their own improvised sleeping spots, peacefully resting.

"Looks like we took down the Titanborne," he thought, exhaling a soft sigh of relief. "And my explosion didn't hurt anyone."

But something nagged at him—Edith wasn't among them. His eyes swept the cave again, landing on the sealed entrance that Lucian had left slightly ajar.

"She must've stepped out," Liam muttered under his breath, letting the thought slide for the moment.

As he rose, he noticed an odd sensation in his left hand, as if clutching something. Glancing down, he opened his palm to reveal a peculiar black object. It shimmered faintly in the dim cave light, irregular like a stone but with the cold, smooth texture of metal.

"This... looks like the stone Grandpa used to forge my sword," Liam mused, frowning. "Only... darker."

He pocketed it, deciding he'd puzzle it out later. For now, he needed to cleanse himself—he looked and smelled like a smoked fish after that fight.

Exiting the cave, he was greeted by the warm amber glow of the setting sun. The sky blazed in hues of orange and gold, with the sun hanging low, perhaps an hour or two before it would vanish behind the horizon. The forest was alive with the sound of rustling leaves and distant birdsong.

Taking in the fresh air, Liam stretched before heading toward the riverbank to wash off.

Reaching the natural pools near the waterfall, he paused. There, standing knee-deep in the water, was Edith. Her shirt was off, revealing a white undergarment that modestly covered her breast. Her long

pants remained intact, a choice that made her stand out among the other academy girls who often wore skirts.

The sun's light caught her figure, making her pale skin glow faintly. She had her back turned to him initially, rinsing out her shirt, but as she sensed movement and turned, their eyes locked.

Edith froze, her blue eyes wide with a mix of shock and embarrassment.

Liam, ever composed, simply nodded and said, "Hey."

Her face turned crimson as she quickly crouched, arms crossing over her breast. "CAN'T YOU SEE I'M WASHING UP?!" she shrieked, her voice echoing through the trees.

"Didn't know you were here," Liam replied nonchalantly, as if her flustered reaction was unwarranted. He turned to walk back to the riverbank, unbothered. "Take your time, but please hurry."

Edith glared at his retreating figure, still red-faced. "Hurry?! The audacity..." she muttered under her breath, sinking lower into the water.

Back at the riverbank, Liam sat cross-legged, waiting patiently, entirely unaffected. "She's loud," he muttered to himself, watching the rippling water.

Liam waited patiently by the riverbank, listening to the sound of the waterfall as Edith finished her wash. It wasn't long before she emerged from the pool, her shirt loosely draped over her shoulder as she wrung out her damp hair.

He glanced her way and, in his usual blunt tone, remarked, "Now that I look at you closely, I see how well toned your body is. Your muscles look well-defined. It suits you."

Edith froze mid-step, staring at him with wide eyes, completely taken aback by the sudden comment. She'd grown used to the teasing from her peers—boys calling her a tomboy or making jokes about her being more of a "fighter" than a "lady," and even girls poking fun at how she didn't care for dainty things. Compliments like Liam's were... rare.

For a moment, she felt her cheeks warm, and she stammered, "Uh... thanks. That's... kind of you to say."

Liam gave a small nod, oblivious to the impact his words had. "It's just the truth," he added simply, turning back to the riverbank.

The moment lingered for a few seconds before Edith shook her head, pushing past her flustered feelings. "Anyway," she said, her tone shifting to cover up her embarrassment, "how are you feeling? That explosion you pulled off was no joke. You don't look hurt, but pulling that much myst must've drained you."

Liam turned his gaze toward her, his face as calm as ever. "I'm fine. My myst reserves are fully restored. There's nothing to worry about."

Edith raised an eyebrow, clearly skeptical. "Fully restored? After that? You're telling me you didn't even feel a dent?"

He shook his head. "No dent. It's nothing unusual."

What Liam didn't say was that Crimson Breathing had played a critical role. The technique allowed him to absorb myst from the environment even while unconscious, accelerating his recovery far beyond what anyone would consider normal. But he wasn't about to share that detail—not with Edith or anyone else.

Edith, however, remained surprised. "That's... impressive. I mean, Karla's myst reserves were practically spent after her water technique. She's still resting. But I guess it's no comparison—you're rank 8, and she's Class C. Makes sense."

Liam didn't respond, letting the comparison hang in the air as Edith gathered her belongings.

As he stood to head for the pools, Edith called out, "Don't take too long. The others—and even I—will be waiting for your explanation."

Liam paused, turning back to her. "Explanation?"

Edith smirked, her voice taking on a teasing lilt. "You know, about why you decided to abandon the group mid-battle to play lone wolf before coming back play hero. You've got some explaining to do, and I'm not letting you off the hook so easily this time."

"Fair enough. I'll be quick."

"Good," she replied, her tone softening. "And Liam?"

He glanced back at her.

"Thanks... for everything," she said quietly, her voice sincere.

He nodded once before heading to the pools, his expression unreadable. Edith watched him go, feeling a small sense of relief and gratitude for the strange but reliable teammate.

After washing up, Liam made his way back to the cave as the sun dipped below the horizon, painting the forest in shades of orange and purple. The familiar scent of roasting fish greeted him as he neared the entrance, mingling with the soft hum of conversation echoing from within.

"Thank the stars we didn't finish all the fish earlier," Karla said, holding her stick with a roasted fish close to the fire. "Who knows what we'd be eating now?"

"Berries again, probably," Edith chuckled as she turned her own fish over the flames.

Lucian and Robin sat by the fire as well, each with their respective fish sticks.

As Liam stepped into the cave, the group turned to face him.

"And here's our savior," Karla said with a mocking tone, smirking.

"Not the time for your jokes, Karla," Edith said, though a soft chuckle escaped her lips.

"What? I'm praising him," Karla retorted with a huff. "Even if I didn't really see his stunt properly since, you know, I was half-conscious at the time."

"H-How are you feeling, Liam?" Robin asked nervously, offering a small, genuine smile.

"I'm fine," Liam replied evenly, his voice calm as usual.

"Well, of course you're fine," Lucian said, his tone tinged with irritation. "Now, sit your ass down and explain yourself."

Liam said nothing and walked over to join the group by the fire. As he sat down, Karla and Edith tossed him a stick with a fish skewered on it.

"Thanks," he said, taking it without much fuss.

Edith leaned back slightly, a sly smile playing on her lips. "So, Liam, we're all grateful—especially Lucian—for your heroic stunt that saved us back there."

Lucian shot her a sharp glare but said nothing, opting instead to focus on the fire.

"Anyway," Edith continued, "we were all curious. Why'd you suddenly change direction back on the way to the battlefield? Karla told us you just left her and went somewhere else on your own."

"To be honest, I was kinda pissed about it," Edith admitted, though her tone was lighthearted.

"Kinda?" Karla scoffed with a laugh. "You exploded."

Edith's eyes twitched as she smacked Karla lightly on the head. "Enough out of you."

Turning back to Liam, she let out a sigh. "But seriously, Liam, we're curious. Why'd you make that decision?"

Liam took another bite of his fish, chewing thoughtfully before responding. "It wasn't much of a decision. The Titanborne's presence was attracting a swarm of Feral-class demons. I had to divert them before they reached us, because if they'd have swarmed the battlefield and overwhelmed us."

The casual tone in which he delivered this information caused the others to freeze. Karla stopped mid-bite, Robin's eyes widened, and even Lucian's head shot up, his irritation replaced with disbelief.

None of them had realized this during the fight. To them, the disruption caused by the Titanborne had seemed limited to their Whisper spell being thrown off. But now, hearing that it had also attracted a horde of Feral-class demons, they were shaken.

"Wait, what?" Edith said, leaning forward. "There were Feral-class demons heading our way?!"

"How did you even know they were coming?" Lucian finally asked, his voice low with disbelief.

"I sensed them," Liam said matter-of-factly. "You were all too close to the Titanborne to notice, but I could feel them converging from the outskirts."

Lucian crossed his arms, his expression hardening. "You should've told us. We could've—"

"Done what?" Liam interrupted calmly. "Splitting our focus would've gotten someone hurt. You handled the Titanborne, and I handled the demons. That's teamwork, the main purpose of this exam."

The room fell silent, the crackle of the fire filling the space. Finally, Edith sighed, leaning back against the cave wall.

"Well, you're not wrong," she admitted, her tone reluctant. "But next time, don't play the lone wolf. At least warn us before pulling something like that."

"If there's time for explanations, no problem." Liam said.

The tension eased as Karla laughed, the sound breaking the quiet. "Well, at least we didn't end up demon chow. Here's to surviving another day, huh?"

The group raised their fish sticks in an impromptu toast, their laughter echoing through the cave as the fire burned brightly, warding off the encroaching night.