

ShadowBound 174

Chapter 174: Day Three: My Dagger

As the sun began to rise in Vlardia, Liam stirred awake, finding himself lying in his makeshift earthen bed. His body felt heavy, but the familiar damp chill of the cave brought him some clarity. Slowly, he opened his eyes and immediately noticed Edith resting on her earthen bed opposite him. The others were nowhere to be seen.

'How did I end up here? And... my arm?' Liam thought, his eyes narrowing as he flexed his right arm. Though still marred with scars, it looked far better than he remembered before losing consciousness. The last thing he recalled was the searing pain from his battle with the Malgath. Yet, the arm he stared at now felt... functional.

'The others must've used the Mend spell, but... that wouldn't account for this level of recovery. Even at their best, none of them could have done this.' His thoughts churned as he sat up, wincing slightly at the stiffness in his muscles. His gaze dropped to his body, and he noticed his undergarment was practically in tatters, scorched away from the battle. With an annoyed huff, he grabbed the ruined cloth and tore it off, discarding it to the side. He reached for his uniform shirt beside the bed, slipping it on without a word.

'Maybe the Academy sent healers here,' he mused while buttoning the shirt, though a faint doubt lingered in his mind. 'But why only half-heal us? That doesn't add up. Well, doesn't matter. I'll just fix the rest myself with Mend later.' Dismissing the thought, he made his way toward the mouth of the cave.

The sunlight greeted him the moment he stepped outside, bright and warm against his skin. He blinked, adjusting to the light, but it wasn't the sun that caught his attention next—it was the sound of raised voices.

Karla and Lucian stood a short distance away, their tone sharp as they argued about something. Their bickering was cut short when Robin, who had been quietly sitting near them, turned and spotted Liam.

"H—hey, Liam," Robin called, his voice hesitant but relieved.

At Robin's words, both Karla and Lucian turned to see Liam stepping out of the cave. Their expressions quickly shifted.

"Liam! You're up!" Karla exclaimed, rushing over to him. "How's your arm? Are you okay?"

Lucian, on the other hand, crossed his arms, a slight smirk tugging at his lips. "Looks like you just don't know when to stay down, huh?"

Liam's gaze shifted between them, his face calm and unreadable. "I'm fine," he replied evenly before glancing over their forms. They looked surprisingly well. "You all seem... unharmed."

"Yep!" Karla said, nodding quickly. "I woke up and found all my injuries gone, and my strength's... well, decent, I guess. Same for these two." She gestured toward Robin and Lucian. "At least that's what they said when I asked."

"I see," Liam said, his tone clipped as he processed the information. "That's good to know. I'm off to look for something of mine, I'll be back." Without another word, he began walking past Karla, his focus elsewhere.

"Wait!" Karla called after him. "Where are you going? Your condition is still... "

"What condition?" Liam asked, not breaking his stride.

"Uh, your arm?" Lucian chimed in, his voice laced with dry amusement.

"I'm fine," Liam replied flatly. "I'll use Mend later."

Karla quickly jogged up beside him, her curiosity evident. "What are you going to look for? I could help."

Karla frowned as she hurried to keep pace with Liam. "Your dagger? You mean the one you were using during the fight? Isn't it, uh... a little dangerous to be wandering around looking for that thing in your state? I mean, what if—"

"Nothing is gonna happen," Liam replied flatly as he and Karla walked deeper into the forest.

Karla huffed, crossing her arms as she kept up with him. "What makes you so sure about that?"

Liam glanced at her briefly, then turned his attention back to the path ahead. 'From the amount of killing intent the Malgath and I released during our fight, there's no way anything ordinary—animal or demon—would dare stick around. It's just a natural phenomenon. The weak flee when the strong clash.'

"It's just a feeling," Liam said aloud. "Besides, I can't sense any demons or animals nearby. Can you?"

Karla furrowed her brow, closing her eyes for a moment to focus. "Well... no, I can't sense anything, but still, you're not exactly in the condition to—"

"Hey, Karla," Liam interrupted. "I don't mind you tagging along, but save your worrying for yourself. That's the last thing I need right now."

Karla paused, taken aback by his bluntness, but quickly shook it off and skipped ahead to catch up with him again. "Alright then, I'll stop," she said lightly.

The two walked in silence for a while, the forest around them eerily quiet. Liam scanned their surroundings as he began to notice the familiar terrain. They were entering the area that had been set ablaze during his fight with the Malgath.

'I remember this entire section of the forest being on fire. Did the academy send others to use Nature magic to restore the vegetation?' he wondered as he took in the greenery around him.

'If they did, finding my dagger's going to be a pain. The last place I saw it was...' His thoughts trailed off as his nose caught the faint, distinct scent of burnt soil and wood.

Without a word, Liam adjusted his course, heading toward the source of the scent. Karla noticed the sudden shift and followed him without question, her eyes wandering to the trees and ground around them. She seemed to be biting her tongue, resisting the urge to ask what he was doing.

After a few minutes of walking, the two came to a stop. Before them lay a stark contrast to the lush forest they had just walked through.

The area was a wasteland—trees reduced to charred stumps, branches broken and scattered, and the vegetation utterly destroyed. The air still carried the faint, acrid smell of smoke and scorched earth. The devastation was contained within a distinct radius, as if the chaos had been confined to this one brutal battleground.

As Liam scanned the scorched clearing, his eyes darted across the charred remains of trees and ash-covered ground. He was searching for the dagger—his only remaining one since the second had been shattered under the relentless punches of the Malgath. Karla, on the other hand, wandered a few paces behind him, taking in the destruction with wide eyes.

'All of this... done by someone ranked 8?' Karla thought, her shock evident as she glanced around. She couldn't imagine the strength of those ranked higher than Liam if this was the extent of his power. Her gaze lingered on the destruction before a new thought crossed her mind. 'But then why does Lucian, someone ranked 5th, seem weaker than him? Is ranking not everything?'

Her train of thought was interrupted when Liam abruptly stopped walking. He narrowed his eyes at something glinting faintly under the sunlight. Without a word, he strode toward it, kicking aside some debris to reveal the object.

It was his dagger, lying half-buried in the ash and dirt. Liam knelt down and picked it up, inspecting its blade. A faint scorch mark marred its surface, but the dagger remained intact. He gave a small nod to himself before straightening up. Without sparing a glance at Karla, he turned and began walking back toward the cave.

Karla blinked, realizing he was already heading back, and quickly jogged to catch up. The two walked in silence for a while, before Karla finally broke the silence, her voice soft.

"Thank you."

Liam didn't stop walking, nor did he turn to look at her. "For what?" he asked, his tone as blunt as ever.

"For what you said during the fight," Karla admitted, her gaze fixed on the ground as they walked. "You know, about not letting fear control me. I don't know if you meant to be encouraging or if it was just another one of your blunt comments, but... it helped. It really did."

Liam glanced at her from the corner of his eye. "There's no need to thank me for that. Besides, you needed to focus, and that's all I wanted."

Karla smiled faintly, shaking her head. "Well, it did help. Even if you didn't mean it to. So... thanks."

Liam said nothing in response, his gaze fixed forward as they approached the edge of the scorched clearing.

'He seems a bit... sensitive,' Karla thought as she trailed behind Liam, watching his rigid posture. 'Ever since he woke up. I mean, it's Liam—we're talking about the guy who barely shows any emotion. But now, he seems... irritated, like something's really eating at him.'

Soon, they reached the cave. Lucian and Robin were sitting just outside the entrance, seemingly chatting idly. But now, there was a third figure among them—Edith. She was awake, her back leaning against the stone wall.

"You guys are back," Edith said, her voice soft.

The moment Karla spotted Edith, her face lit up, and before Liam could even blink, she bolted toward her friend.

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"Edith!! You're awake!" Karla cried out, practically flinging herself at Edith, who barely had time to react. Karla wrapped her arms around her in an overly dramatic hug, her voice turning into a mock wail. "I thought you weren't gonna wake up! I was so scared!"

Edith let out a small chuckle, patting Karla's back lightly. "Karla, you're squeezing the life out of me."

"I don't care! I'm just glad you're awake! Don't scare me like that again, okay?" Karla said, pulling back slightly to look at her friend's face, her grin wide but her eyes brimming with genuine relief.

"Yeah, yeah, I'll try not to take another nap after getting poisoned," Edith replied dryly, though there was a glint of amusement in her eyes.