

ShadowBound 177

Chapter 177: Day Three: End Of Exam

As Liam and Edith made their way back, the dense forest gradually gave way to a more open path. The morning sun had climbed higher, its golden rays piercing through the canopy, casting dappled light across the ground.

When they finally stepped into the clearing, the entrance to their cave came into view. However, what caught Edith's attention first was the massive earthen wall stretching around the perimeter—a formidable barrier of reinforced stone and compacted dirt, standing at least ten feet high.

"Huh..." Edith placed a hand on her hip, surveying the structure. "Lucian really went all out, huh?"

Liam studied the wall with a neutral expression. "It looks solid."

As they neared the entrance, they spotted Lucian standing near the base of the wall, arms crossed, watching their approach. Robin sat perched on a nearby rock, absently fiddling with his arrows, while Karla was closer to the cave, sorting through a bundle of firewood.

Lucian was the first to speak, his smirk already in place. "Welcome back, lovebirds," he remarked, his gaze landing on the deer draped over Liam's shoulder. "Looks like you two had a successful hunt."

Robin's eyes widened as he finally noticed the carcass. "W—wow, that's a clean kill! I'm guessing Edith made the shot?" he asked, his voice a little nervous.

"Obviously," Edith said smugly, stretching her arms. "One shot, straight through the heart."

"N—No offense, Liam," Robin added quickly.

"None taken," Liam replied flatly.

Karla turned to them with a bright smile. "Nice work, you guys. That should last us for the rest of our stay."

"Yeah, considering we're done with the exam tomorrow," Edith sighed, tossing Robin his quiver and bow.

"Thanks, Robin."

"N—No problem," Robin muttered, catching them awkwardly.

Liam stepped forward, letting the deer drop with a dull thud before turning his attention to the wall. "You made this?"

Lucian nodded. "Didn't want any unexpected visitors while we're stuck here. It's sturdy enough to hold against smaller threats, and I can reinforce it more if needed."

Edith walked up to the wall and knocked her knuckles against it. "Not bad. Though, it kinda feels like we're trapped inside just as much as it keeps things out."

Lucian smirked. "That's the point. If something tries to get in, it'll have to break through first. That gives us time to react."

"True," Edith admitted. "Though I doubt we'll need reinforcements. There haven't been any demons or even wildlife nearby since this morning."

Karla stretched her arms above her head. "Sounds like a lot of work just to keep things out. But hey, as long as I don't wake up with something trying to chew my face off, I won't complain."

"Alright, enough chit-chat." Edith clapped her hands, grabbing everyone's attention. "Let's get cooking. I doubt any of us can deal with hunger much longer."

She turned to Robin. "You said you had hunting experience, right?"

"Y—Yeah, but just a little," Robin replied hesitantly.

"Alright, can you skin an animal? I can do it, but I need someone to help me out. And I definitely don't trust these two silver-spoon brats over there," Edith said, side-eyeing Lucian and Karla.

"And Liam's useless in that department too, so..." she trailed off.

Robin hesitated, then nodded. "Yeah, my dad spent a lot of time teaching me how to do that when I was younger."

"Perfect. Now, here's the plan," Edith announced. "Liam, you're on watch duty. Karla and Lucian, you two will set up the fire pit—outside the cave this time," she said, pointing at a clear space nearby. "Robin and I will handle skinning the deer."

Lucian groaned. "Why do I have to do the grunt work while Liam gets to sit around? And moreover, he is a fire magic user!"

"Shhh," Karla interrupted, patting his shoulder. "You need survival skills, muscle-brain. Luckily for you, I learned how to make a fire pit, thanks to Edith. Now, it's time for me to pass on that sacred knowledge. Follow me, my faithful student."

With an exaggerated grin, she grabbed Lucian's wrist and started dragging him toward the pile of firewood.

Liam, meanwhile, leapt onto the rocky cliff above the cave, choosing a vantage point for his watch duty.

'Finally, some peace.'

As the warmth of the afternoon sun settled over him, Liam let out a slow breath, allowing himself a rare moment of calm.

From his vantage point above the cave, Liam sat with one knee propped up, his sharp eyes scanning the dense treeline. The earthen wall stood firm, enclosing their temporary camp, and from what he could tell, there was no movement beyond it—no signs of wildlife, no lurking demons, nothing that suggested immediate danger. It was quiet, almost unnaturally so, but that only meant he had less to worry about for now.

Below him, the others were busy with their tasks.

Lucian and Karla had finished assembling the fire pit, a solid ring of stones encircling dry firewood. Lucian, now crouching, worked on igniting the kindling with a focused expression, while Karla leaned on a log, watching him with an amused smirk.

"You're actually decent at this," she teased.

Lucian huffed, striking the flint again. "Tch. Like I'd fail at something this simple."

Karla grinned. "Suuuure. Keep telling yourself that, golden boy."

A few feet away, Edith and Robin were wrapping up the skinning process. The deer carcass was now stripped clean, its hide set aside while they drained the remaining blood. Edith wiped her hands against her pants, satisfied with their work.

"Not bad, Robin," she said, glancing at him. "You're actually useful for something."

Robin let out a nervous chuckle. "Uh... thanks, I think?"

Edith dusted off her hands and turned toward Lucian and Karla. "You guys done with the fire yet?"

Lucian, who had finally managed to get the flames going, leaned back smugly. "Of course."

"Great," Edith said as she and Robin carried the cleaned meat over. They skewered thick slabs onto sharpened sticks, propping them above the growing fire. The scent of raw meat mixed with the smoky air as the flames began their slow roasting process.

Karla stretched her arms with a satisfied sigh. "Finally. I was starting to think we'd never eat."

Liam, still perched above, glanced down at the scene. The camp was secure, the fire was crackling, and the others seemed... content. He let out a quiet breath, resting his arms on his knees.

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Liam hopped down from his vantage point, landing lightly on his feet before making his way toward the fire. The scent of roasted meat filled the air, rich and smoky, making it clear that the effort had been worth it. He took his seat on one of the makeshift stone stools Lucian had raised, positioned slightly away from the group but still within their circle.

The flames crackled, casting flickering shadows across their faces as they each grabbed a portion of the meat. The outside was crisp and golden brown, while the inside remained tender and juicy, the juices glistening under the firelight. Edith, who had taken the lead in roasting, tore off a piece and bit into it first.

"Mmm, damn, I outdid myself," she said smugly, chewing with satisfaction.

Robin, taking a hesitant bite, nodded eagerly. "Yeah, this is way better than I expected! I mean, I figured it would be good, but this—this is amazing."

Karla smirked as she took a bite of her own. "Guess you actually have some value after all, Edith."

"Gee, thanks," Edith scoffed before turning to Liam, who had silently taken a piece but had yet to eat it. "Well? You gonna compliment the chef or just stare at your food?"

Liam finally took a bite, chewing slowly before nodding. "It's good."

Edith huffed. "Just 'good'? That's all I get?"

Liam looked at her, deadpan. "Do you want me to write a poem about it?"

Lucian snorted at that, while Karla burst into laughter.

Edith rolled her eyes, but a small smirk tugged at her lips. "Tch. Whatever, as long as you're eating."

They continued eating in comfortable silence for a while, the warmth of the fire taking the edge off the cool evening air. The forest remained quiet, the earthen wall still standing strong, and for once, there was no immediate danger looming over them.

As they ate, Lucian leaned back, stretching his arms. "Can't believe we're almost done with this exam," he mused, gazing up at the darkening sky. "Feels like we've been out here forever."

Karla nodded, resting her elbow on her knee. "Yeah, but hey, at least we're leaving with full stomachs. That's a win in my book."

Edith smirked. "And with bragging rights, too. I mean, let's be honest, we handled this better than most teams probably did."

Robin chuckled nervously. "Y-Yeah... let's hope the instructors see it that way, too."

Liam said nothing, simply continuing to eat as he listened to the conversation. The fire flickered, the night deepened, and for this brief moment, everything was still.