

Liam's plan had been set in motion long before he even entered the final stretch of his journey to face Jamak. A few weeks earlier, when he was still grappling with the intricacies of Extraction, he had stumbled upon a critical realization after an exhausting battle.

He had been locked in a fierce fight, his body marked with cuts and bruises, while his shadows fought alongside him. At the time, Liam could only control around twenty shadows, and though they fought valiantly, he had been worn down by the endless waves of enemies. Exhaustion weighed heavily on him, and his injuries, though not life-threatening, were draining his stamina.

But something unexpected happened when the battle ended. As he recalled his shadows back into the depths of his own, the fatigue that had threatened to cripple him vanished. Even some of his smaller cuts seemed to heal on their own, as if his body had been rejuvenated. That moment of clarity had struck him like lightning.

Draven's cryptic words about shadows being an extension of the master suddenly made perfect sense.

Liam had always thought that the shadows were merely tools—an army to fight at his command. But now, he understood their true nature. The shadows were not just beings under his control; they were a part of him. They drew from his energy and myst, and when destroyed, the toll it took on Liam's body was significant. When they were out in the field fighting and regenerating, they drained him.

But, if they returned unscathed, they carried back energy. The exhaustion that once clung to him evaporated, as if his reserves were replenished, and his minor injuries could be mended.

This revelation was game-changing.

He realized that fighting alongside his shadows could be both a boon and a burden. On the one hand, they provided him with unmatched versatility and power on the battlefield. On the other, their destruction meant a heavy toll on his energy, especially when maintaining and regenerating them in the heat of combat.

Draven had theorized as much, but experiencing it firsthand had been crucial for Liam to grasp the true potential—and risks—of the ability. Since then, Liam had been honing a strategy. The idea was simple: he would engage the enemy with his shadows, allowing them to fight and keep the pressure on while he conserved his strength.

But when necessary, he could recall them, using their return to recharge his energy reserves and mend his wounds.

Now, facing Jamak, his plan had reached its critical juncture.

During the battle against the relentless creatures of the Dark Forest, Liam had deployed his shadow army with full confidence. As the creatures fell, he used the chaos of the battlefield to employ Extraction on the fallen beasts, increasing his shadow army's numbers significantly. He had amassed nearly fifty shadows, a feat he had never thought possible before.

The moment he sent his army to fight the creatures while he faced Jamak alone had been a gamble—one he knew carried significant risk. But he had hoped, at the very least, to injure Jamak, to buy himself time or an advantage. When the reality of Jamak's strength and ferocity became clear, however, Liam knew he would not last much longer without help.

Despite the crushing blows and overwhelming speed of Jamak's attacks, Liam's strategy was still in play. With no other choice left, he called his shadow army back to him. As they melded once more into his form, he felt his energy levels rise. The crushing fatigue that had weighed down his limbs lightened, and his breathing steadied. His wounds, however, were another matter.

Though he was now able to focus on healing himself to some degree, he had not yet mastered the full potential of using his shadows for recovery. His understanding of the process was still rudimentary. For now, he could only heal the most severe injuries—the ones that threatened his ability to fight.

He stopped the bleeding from his open wounds, mended some of the broken bones, but he couldn't restore himself fully. He knew he wasn't at his peak, but he couldn't afford to back down.

Liam stood, his daggers gleaming in his hands. He had taken immense damage from Jamak, and he knew that despite everything, the beast had yet to reveal his full power. Jamak had been toying with him, testing his limits, but now, things were different. Liam was far from finished.

Although not at a hundred percent, Liam's resolve was unshaken. He was willing to push beyond his limits, even as he acknowledged the terrifying reality before him. Jamak was unlike any opponent he had ever faced. His

intelligence, strength, and speed were far beyond anything Liam had encountered in the forest.

Every move Jamak made was precise and calculated, and Liam had the distinct feeling that his adversary still held more cards to play.

But despite the looming threat, a flicker of excitement coursed through Liam's veins. This was the challenge he had been preparing for all along.

Liam's mind was sharp now, focused. His strategy was no longer just a plan; it was a lifeline. He knew he had to be ready for anything Jamak could throw at him.

The air around them felt electric, charged with the tension of the fight. Liam stood, daggers drawn, his eyes fixed on Jamak. Despite the exhaustion that weighed heavily on him. The two had traded blows for what felt like hours, neither one giving the other any room to breathe. Yet for all his determination, Liam knew he was fighting a losing battle. Jamak was simply stronger—faster, even.

But that didn't mean the creature was invincible.

Each time Jamak attacked, his movements were calculated and deliberate. He struck with the force of a mountain, and though Liam's daggers deflected some blows, his body was taking a beating. His ribs felt like they were made of glass, threatening to shatter with every deep breath. His legs were sore from dodging, his arms heavy from blocking.

Still, he fought on, using every ounce of his remaining strength to keep the balance tilted just enough that Jamak couldn't finish him off. Liam had received additional injuries throughout the battle—cuts that ran deep, bruises that darkened his skin, and a gash on his side that burned with every movement—but so had Jamak. For all of the creature's strength, Liam had managed to wound him too.

Cuts crisscrossed Jamak's arms, and blood trickled from his torso where Liam's daggers had found their mark.

But the creature showed no signs of slowing down.

In a flurry of motion, Jamak swung his giant sword, a blade that looked like it could cleave through a boulder. Liam barely managed to avoid the strike, twisting his body out of the way just in time. His feet skidded against the

ground, digging into the dirt as he tried to regain his balance. His mind raced—he had to be faster, had to be smarter.

He's too strong to fight head-on like this. \*I need to get him to make a mistake\*, Liam thought, his breath ragged. His body screamed in protest with every step, but his mind stayed focused, calculating. \*He's powerful, but predictable. He fights like he's invincible.\*

Liam's eyes narrowed. That was Jamak's weakness—his arrogance. Jamak thought he had already won, but Liam wasn't finished yet. He just needed to push the creature to overcommit, to make one wrong move.

As Jamak advanced again, Liam feigned an attack. He darted in with one dagger, aiming for Jamak's exposed side. As expected, Jamak read the move and blocked it with his sword. The clash of metal rang through the forest, and Liam was forced back by the sheer force of the block. But instead of retreating, he pushed forward, launching a series of rapid strikes, each one testing Jamak's defenses.

The creature blocked and parried, his eyes gleaming with amusement. Jamak was toying with him, and that only made Liam more determined.

"You're resilient, I'll give you that," Jamak growled between swings. "But it's time for this to end."

Liam's heart pounded, but he kept his breathing steady. Not yet, he thought, the pieces of his plan coming together. His body was screaming, but his mind was sharp. Not until I get what I need.

Jamak swung again, a wide arc aimed to decapitate Liam, but this time Liam was ready. He ducked beneath the swing and dashed to the side, just out of Jamak's reach. But Jamak followed him, just as Liam had hoped. The creature was growing more impatient, his swings becoming more aggressive, less controlled. This was exactly what Liam needed.

Dodging to the side once more, Liam suddenly shifted his weight, drawing Jamak further off balance. The creature overextended, his sword slicing through empty air where Liam had been just moments before. Liam's heart raced, but not from fear—from the thrill of the plan coming together.

Jamak snarled in frustration and swung again, this time with more force, but Liam was already in motion. He dodged, this time back to the other side, and Jamak followed. But now, the creature's momentum was carrying him too far, and Liam saw his opening—a split second where Jamak wouldn't be able to react in time.

Now.

In one fluid motion, Liam made the dagger in his right hand disappear. His fingers flexed as his hand reached into his shadow, pulling forth the sword his grandfather had crafted for him. The blade, dark and gleaming, felt cool and steady in his hand. He could almost feel his grandfather's presence beside him, urging him on. With a roar, Liam surged forward.

Jamak's eyes widened in surprise, but it was too late. Liam drove the sword straight into Jamak's chest, the blade sinking deep into the creature's heart. The sound of steel piercing flesh was accompanied by Jamak's guttural cry of pain, a sound that echoed through the forest. Liam twisted the blade, ensuring the wound was fatal.

But the victory came at a cost.

Even as Liam struck Jamak, the creature's sword found its mark as well. Jamak's blade drove through Liam's gut, the pain sharp and searing. For a moment, both fighters stood locked together, each one impaled by the other's weapon.

Liam's vision blurred, but he gritted his teeth and refused to let go of the sword. He could feel the life draining from Jamak, the creature's immense strength ebbing away as the sword remained lodged in his heart. Jamak's body shuddered, his eyes wide with disbelief.

"You... you've actually done it," Jamak rasped, his voice thick with shock and agony. "You... defeated me."

Liam didn't respond. He was too focused on keeping himself standing, too focused on the throbbing pain in his abdomen. But he knew—he had won. Jamak's body slumped, the light fading from his eyes as his once-terrifying form collapsed to the ground.

The battle was over. Liam stood victorious, though barely.

Jamak lay motionless at his feet, his towering form no longer a threat. Liam's sword remained embedded in the creature's chest, and for a brief moment, all was still.