

Liam collapsed to the ground, the pain radiating through his body as if a fire burned inside him. He pressed his hand to the wound in his stomach, trying to steady his breath, his chest heaving as blood pooled beneath him. His vision blurred, but he clung to consciousness, forcing himself to focus.

His dark magic flickered weakly around his fingers as he desperately tried to seal the wound, but the pain was too much—his body was on the edge of giving out.

Lying there, feeling the coldness seep into his bones, Liam's mind began to drift. Memories flickered past his eyes—moments of his life where death had been a constant companion. He saw the faces of the creatures he had slain, the countless battles he had fought. But most of all, he remembered his grandfather. The night of his death, the hollow ache that had filled Liam since then.

Why didn't I die with him? he wondered, the thought creeping in like a dark whisper. His determination, that tiny sliver of hope, had been the only thing to

keep him moving forward. It had brought him to this cursed forest, to this moment. And now, lying here, his life slipping away, he wondered if it had all been for nothing.

His thoughts wandered to the day he first stepped into Kyrell Forest, the sheer terror he had felt when he almost died on that very first day. But Draven had saved him. If it wasn't for Draven... Liam thought weakly. Even now, after defeating Jamak, he knew his journey was far from over.

Suddenly, a sound broke through his haze. A cough—a low, wet, rattling cough that made Liam freeze.

Jamak.

His heart raced, tension coursing through him as he turned his head slowly. Jamak's body was still, but his chest rose and fell faintly. Blood trickled from the corner of his mouth, his once-powerful frame now reduced to a barely moving shadow of what it had been. He wasn't moving, but Liam's nerves were on edge.

Then, Jamak whispered a word. "Emak..."

Liam's brow furrowed in confusion, but before he could react, a strange sensation washed over him. It was like cold water flooding his veins, surging through his body. The shock of it made him cry out in pain, his back arching as if lightning had struck him. His muscles clenched, his hands digging into the earth as he gasped for breath.

The energy coursed through him, wild and untamed, and for a moment, he thought it would rip him apart.

Then, as quickly as it had come, it stopped.

Panting, Liam collapsed back onto the ground, his body trembling. He was still alive—still covered in blood, his wounds throbbing. He hadn't been healed, but something had changed.

"What... what did you do to me?" Liam growled, his voice barely above a whisper, filled with frustration and pain. His eyes narrowed at Jamak, anger bubbling up in him despite his weakened state. He needed answers.

Jamak didn't answer. His chest rose and fell in shallow breaths, his eyes distant.

"Answer me!" Liam shouted, though his voice cracked. It wasn't even loud enough to echo.

"Thank you... Liam Hunter," Jamak finally whispered, his voice weak and strained.

Liam's eyes widened in disbelief. Thank you? He was stunned, even more so because the gratitude felt genuine. But the irritation returned quickly. He gritted his teeth, struggling to prop himself up on his elbows. "Cut the crap and answer me!" he demanded.

Jamak's eyes flickered, and with what little strength he had left, he began to speak. "For nearly a century now, I've been trapped in this cursed forest... along with my brother."

Liam's confusion deepened. Jamak had a brother?

"Decades ago, we entered this forest, thinking we would leave stronger. But the forest... changed me," Jamak said, his voice faltering. "It made me into this... creature. King of the beasts. But my brother... he remained human."

Liam's breathing slowed as he listened, the weight of Jamak's words pressing down on him. "We tried to escape... but the forest bound us, separated us, turned us into guardians of this forsaken place."

Jamak's words sent chills down Liam's spine. He had thought the forest was just a place of darkness and danger, but to know that Jamak had once been human, trapped here with his brother for so long—it was almost too much to comprehend.

"I was forced to slay anyone who made it this far. Knights, warriors... all fell to my blade. But today, Liam, you ended that. You freed us."

Liam felt the weight of those words settle heavily in his chest. He had defeated Jamak, but he hadn't just won a fight—he had ended centuries of suffering. The realization left him speechless.

"Wait... what did you do to me?" Liam asked again, his voice hoarse but insistent.

"The magic you felt... it's called Transcendent Affinity," Jamak replied, a faint smile tugging at his lips. "A gift from the forest. It merges with your magic, giving you boundless power... if you can control it."

Liam's heart skipped a beat. Boundless power?

But before he could press for more, Jamak's body began to fade, his form dissolving like mist into the air.

"Hey! Finish what you were saying!" Liam yelled, panic rising in his chest as he watched Jamak disappear.

Jamak's voice was faint, almost a whisper. "You'll find my brother. He's already helped you... in more ways than you know."

Liam's blood ran cold. Realization struck him like a hammer. "No..." he muttered, his mind racing. "No, it can't be..."

Forcing himself to his feet, despite the burning pain in his stomach, Liam began moving. His body protested with every step, but he didn't stop. He knew exactly who Jamak's brother was.

"Damn you, old man," Liam muttered through gritted teeth, staggering through the forest. "You could've just told me from the start."

His steps were uneven, each one more painful than the last as he stumbled, hitting tree trunks and collapsing more than once. But he kept moving, driven by a mix of fury and desperation.

"DRAVENNN!!!"

Liam's voice echoed through the forest as he screamed, his body shaking with rage. After what felt like an eternity, he saw him. Draven sat there, gazing into the distance, as if he had been waiting for Liam.

With what little strength he had left, Liam staggered forward, grabbing Draven by the collar and pulling him close.

"Why didn't you tell me from the beginning?!" Liam demanded, his voice shaking.

Draven gave him a small smirk, his eyes soft. "It wasn't my will, kid," he replied calmly, the faintest hint of amusement in his voice.

Liam felt his anger flare. "You and your brother... you keep saying that..." But before he could finish, Draven's words stopped him cold.

"My time's running out, Liam. I'm fading, just like Jamak."

The world seemed to stop around Liam. "No... no, you can't be..." His voice cracked, emotion flooding him. Draven had been with him through everything. He couldn't just vanish like this. Not now.

"Listen," Draven said gently, his voice calm despite his fading form. "The Transcendent Affinity... don't merge it with your magic until you're ready. Until both your body and your magic are strong enough. If you try it too soon... you'll burn yourself alive."

Liam's throat tightened. "Shut up... just shut up. I'll find a way to save you."

Draven smiled softly. "Kid... my time's up. But yours is just beginning. Stay strong. Keep moving forward."

And with that, Draven faded, disappearing into the air, leaving nothing behind.

Liam knelt there, staring at the spot where Draven had been, tears streaming down his face. He had lost someone again. The ache in his chest was unbearable, a crushing weight of loss and frustration. And deep down, the uncertainty gnawed at him—he still didn't understand the full extent of the magic that had been branded into him by the forest.

The world around him began to shift. The trees, the darkness of Kyrell Forest, all of it started to fade, as though the forest itself was dissolving into thin air. Soon, there was nothing left. No beasts, no shadows—only Liam, kneeling alone beneath the high sun.

"DAMN IT!!" he screamed, his voice echoing through the vast emptiness.

Exhausted, both physically and emotionally, Liam collapsed. His vision blurred as his body gave in, and darkness took him.

Hours later, a carriage passed by the barren land where Kyrell Forest once stood. A man riding inside spotted the boy lying motionless in the field.

"Stop the carriage," the man ordered, leaping down to check on Liam.

The man knelt beside him, his brows furrowing. "What's a boy like him doing out here?"

His apprentice, standing nervously behind him, looked around, her face pale. "Sir... this place... this is where the Forest of Kyrell should be."

The man glanced up, his expression turning to shock. The forest was gone. Nothing but empty land stretched before them.

"Forget about that for now," the man said, shaking off the thought.

"Help me get him on the carriage. We'll take him with us and get him treated," he ordered, and together they carefully lifted Liam, placing him in the back of the carriage.

As they rode off, Liam lay unconscious, his journey far from over.