

Five minutes later, Liam and Grandpa Billy arrived at their small home nestled in the hills.

"I'm starving," Grandpa Billy announced as they stepped inside. "What about you?"

"Same here. We can eat the food I brought," Liam suggested, grinning.

"Of course," Billy said, chuckling. "I'll be paying for it later, I'm sure."

After finishing their meal, Liam decided to rest in his favorite tree while Grandpa Billy headed to his workshop to begin crafting Liam's sword.

Lying on a sturdy branch, Liam reflected on the day's events. *Barely escaped that angry mob, and Grandpa shows up just in time to save me from a demon

wolf. But what were those people talking about... the Dark Forest?* He sat up, his curiosity gnawing at him. *I should ask Grandpa...*

Without wasting time, Liam scrambled down from the tree and rushed to the workshop.

"Grandpa? Whoa! You're already done with the sword?" Liam asked, his eyes wide.

"Just finished it," Billy said, holding up the finely crafted weapon. The blade shimmered in the fading light, its edges sharp and precise. "Impressive, huh?"

"Amazing," Liam marveled, carefully running his fingers along the hilt. "But, Grandpa, there's something I wanted to ask you."

Billy set the sword down, turning to face Liam with a knowing look. "What's on your mind, kid?"

"Do you know anything about the Dark Forest?"

Billy's expression shifted. His usual warmth dimmed slightly, replaced with a seriousness Liam rarely saw. "Yes, I do. But why are you asking?"

"The people back in town... they said if they catch me again, they'll throw me in there," Liam explained, trying to keep his tone light but feeling the weight of the words.

Billy let out a soft chuckle, though his eyes remained stern. "They're at their wit's end with you, it seems. But the Dark Forest... that's no joke. Also known as the Forest of Kyrell, it lies to the east, beyond Zone 14. Few dare enter. It's said that once you cross into its borders, you face horrors that defy reality.

Creatures and shadows of things that... aren't from this world."

Liam let out a breath, half-relieved, half-curious. "So, they were bluffing?"

"In a way." Billy stroked his beard, thinking carefully. "But the stories have roots in truth. The forest is said to test knights who are brave or foolish enough to enter. Facing its trials is said to forge the strongest warriors—or destroy them. Even you, Liam, may have to confront it one day."

Liam shook his head. "Me? No way. I'm afraid of the dark, remember?"

Billy placed a hand on his shoulder, his gaze wise and steady. "It's not the darkness you fear, son. It's what you think is hiding inside. But remember, the dark is where strength is born. Confronting it shapes you, even if it changes you in ways you may not expect. The strongest knights emerge from darkness... but only if they survive it."

Liam's expression hardened. "Do you really think I could handle that?"

Billy smiled warmly. "You're stronger than you know, Liam. One day, you'll see that for yourself."

Liam's resolve strengthened. "Alright, old man. One day, I'll take on the Dark Forest."

"I'm counting on it," Billy said, pride glinting in his eyes. "But for now, shouldn't you be getting ready for the Haven Festival?"

"Festival? Oh! I forgot!" Liam jumped up. "I need to get ready!"

A few minutes later, Liam returned, dressed for the festivities. "Aren't you coming, Grandpa?"

"I'll be there soon. Just finishing up here," Billy said, a faint smile on his lips. "Go ahead, I'm right behind you."

"See you there!" Liam called as he dashed off toward the festival grounds.

As Liam arrived at the festival, his excitement grew. The air was filled with the sound of laughter, music, and vibrant decorations. He wandered through the lively scene, soaking in the joy around him. *This is awesome!* he thought, grinning as he watched people dance and celebrate.

But back on the hill, as Grandpa Billy prepared to head out, something unexpected happened. As soon as he stepped outside, he froze. Three figures stood in front of the house, their dark forms blending into the shadows. The air around them crackled with a sinister energy.

Grade X demons? Billy's eyes narrowed as he quickly assessed the situation. His heart pounded, but his expression remained calm. *Liam's at the festival. Good. But the one in the back... his energy feels different...*

One of the demons, seated lazily on a rock, smirked. His presence was overwhelming, radiating malice. "Billy Hunter, I presume?" His voice was cold, filled with disdain.

"Who's asking?" Billy replied, hand resting on the sword he'd just forged.

"I am Sanguis, Ruler of the Blood Demons," the demon said, standing up slowly. "And you, Hunter, are in the way of our mission. We're here to kill you."

Billy gripped the hilt tightly. "And what mission would that be?"

"Exterminating all dark magic users," Sanguis said with a sadistic grin. "And you... well, you're the last one."

Billy's mind raced. *They don't know about Liam's dark magic. Good.* He stood firm. "If you want me dead, you'll have to earn it."

"Very well," Sanguis said, stepping back. "Entertain me."

Without hesitation, Billy charged, his sword flashing as he struck at the three Grade X demons. Sparks flew as their weapons clashed, and despite the overwhelming odds, Billy fought with unmatched skill. He parried their attacks, striking back with precision and power. But the demons were relentless, their strength almost inhuman.

At the festival, Liam was enjoying himself when an uneasy feeling crept over him. He looked toward the hill, his brow furrowing. *Grandpa hasn't shown up yet... where is he?*

Before he could think further, a woman came running through the crowd, her voice filled with panic. "DEMONS! DEMONS ON THE HILL!"

Liam's heart dropped as he turned to see smoke rising from the direction of their home. *No...*

Without hesitation, he sprinted up the hill, fear fueling his every step.

Billy was on his last legs, blood dripping from his wounds. The three Grade X demons had overwhelmed him, and now Sanguis stood over him, his sword raised for the final blow. "You fought well, old man. But it's over."

Before Sanguis could strike, he hesitated. A figure was racing toward them—Liam, but something was off. Sanguis smirked. "A child? He's no threat."

Liam burst from the trees, charging at one of the demons with pure rage. He swung his fist, but the demon dodged effortlessly. Sanguis waved him off. "Leave him. He's not worth it."

As the demons vanished into a blood-red mist, Liam rushed to his grandfather's side.

"Grandpa! No, no... stay with me!"

Billy opened his eyes, his voice weak but steady. "Liam... you're gonna be fine, kid."

"No! You're not leaving me!" Liam cried, tears streaming down his face.

Billy smiled faintly. "You have a destiny, Liam. Enroll at the Dark Knight Academy. Do that for me..."

Liam nodded, choking back sobs. "I will."

With a final breath, Billy closed his eyes, leaving Liam alone in the quiet night.

As the sun rose, Liam buried his grandfather on the hill. The house was destroyed, and nothing remained for him in Benbrok. With only his grandfather's sword and a small pack, Liam set off east.

Three days later, he stood at the edge of the Dark Forest, his heart heavy but determined. He unsheathed his sword and took a deep breath.

"Well, Grandpa... I'm not afraid anymore."

With that, Liam stepped into the shadows, disappearing into the darkness.