SHADOWBOUND: THE NEED FOR POWER

## Chapter 3 Shadow And Flames

The Dark Forest loomed ahead, an endless expanse of twisted trees and unending shadows. Liam took a deep breath, his resolve steeling against the palpable sense of dread. Each step he took seemed to deepen the darkness around him, the trees curling inward as if to confine him. The forest was a place of oppressive silence, broken only by the occasional rustle of unseen creatures.

*This is it,* Liam thought, tightening his grip on the sword his grandfather had forged. *I have to prove myself.*

His initial bravado began to wane as he ventured deeper into the forest. The once intimidating shadows now seemed to close in around him, making every snapped twig and whisper of the wind feel like a potential threat. As he moved cautiously, strange creatures began to emerge from the darkness. They were shadowy, grotesque forms with glowing eyes that seemed to pierce through the gloom.

Their grotesque shapes shifted and twisted, leaving Liam with an unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Drawing his sword, Liam faced the first of these creatures. He swung the blade with all his might, but the creature merely absorbed the impact, its form rippling like disturbed water. He tried again and again, each strike proving to be less effective than the last. The creatures seemed impervious to his attacks, their hideous forms regenerating almost as quickly as he could damage them.

Exhaustion and frustration mounted as he fought on, each blow feeling like it was sapping more of his strength. The forest seemed to close in around him, the oppressive darkness weighing down on him like a physical force. Finally, with a particularly fierce assault from the creatures, Liam was overwhelmed and fell to the ground, battered and bruised.

His vision blurred, and he could barely keep his eyes open.

*I'm sorry, Grandpa,* he thought, his mind drifting in and out of consciousness. *I failed…*

Just as he felt himself slipping into unconsciousness, a sudden burst of light and energy erupted around him. The creatures screeched and fell back,

disintegrating into shadows. Liam's fading vision saw a shadowy figure cutting through the forest, wielding a sword with skill and precision, dispatching the creatures with ease.

The figure moved with a grace and power that was both mesmerizing and intimidating.

Liam's world went black.

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In the depths of his unconsciousness, Liam found himself in a dreamscape—a familiar place filled with the comforting presence of his grandfather. The scene was a gentle, sunlit meadow, with flowers swaying in a light breeze. Grandpa Billy stood before him, a warm, reassuring smile on his face.

"Liam," Billy's voice echoed, gentle and calm, "you have to wake up, son. Don't give up now."

Liam's heart ached at the sight. "Grandpa… I'm sorry. I couldn't… I failed."

"No, Liam," Billy said, his voice steady. "You haven't failed. You're stronger than you think. Get up and keep moving. Fight for what you believe in."

The vision began to fade, and Liam's eyes snapped open. He was back in the Dark Forest, the oppressive darkness around him now punctuated by the sight of a man seated about ten feet away. The man was cloaked in dark robes, his face hidden in shadow, but his presence was commanding.

Liam struggled to his feet, his body still weak from the battle. "Who… who are you?"

The man rose slowly, his movements smooth and deliberate. "I am someone who happened to be in the right place at the right time," he said, his voice a calm and measured baritone. "And you're Liam Hunter, correct? The one who entered the Dark Forest seeking to prove himself."

Liam nodded, trying to steady his breathing. "Yeah, that's me. Thank you for… saving me. But why?"

The man's eyes, now visible in the dim light, studied Liam with an appraising look. "I have my reasons. The Dark Forest is a place of trials, and it seems

you're not quite ready for them. But you have potential. I saw it when you fought those creatures."

"I'm not sure I understand," Liam said, confusion etching his features. "Why did you help me?"

"Because I see a spark in you," the man replied, his tone serious. "But that spark needs to be kindled. I can help you with that, but first, you need to prove your worth to me."

Before Liam could react, the man moved with blinding speed, attacking him with a swift, precise strike. Liam barely managed to dodge, rolling to the side and drawing his sword in a defensive stance. The man continued his relentless assault, each attack pushing Liam to his limits.

Desperation fueled Liam's movements. In the midst of his frantic defense, an unfamiliar surge of power erupted from him. Flames began to dance around him, and dark tendrils of energy wove through the air. The man's eyes widened in surprise as Liam's previously dormant abilities emerged with a ferocity that matched the man's own attacks.

Liam's sword clashed with the man's blade, and he felt a newfound strength and control that had previously eluded him. The man's attacks became more

focused, testing Liam's capabilities. Finally, after a tense exchange, the man stepped back, his gaze assessing.

"Well done," he said, a hint of approval in his voice. "It seems you possess not only dark magic but also a command of flames. I am impressed."

Liam, panting and exhausted, lowered his sword. "Who are you, and why are you doing this?"

The man smiled faintly. "I am known as Draven. My purpose here is to train you. The Dark Forest is home to a powerful being, Jamak, the Ruler of the Dark Forest. Defeating him is no small feat, but if you can hone your skills and master your magic, you might just stand a chance."

Liam's eyes widened with determination. "You want me to defeat Jamak?"

"Yes," Draven said. "In return for my training, you must confront and defeat Jamak. It will be a trial like no other, but it will forge you into the warrior you need to be."

Liam took a deep breath, his resolve hardening. "Alright. I'll do it. I'll defeat Jamak."

"Good," Draven said, nodding in approval. "Then let's begin your training. The path ahead will be arduous, but it is one you must walk if you are to become the warrior you're destined to be."

With that, Draven turned and began to walk deeper into the forest, leaving Liam to follow. The journey ahead was uncertain, but for the first time since his grandfather's death, Liam felt a glimmer of hope and purpose. The shadows of the Dark Forest seemed a little less daunting, and with Draven's guidance, he was ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead.