SHADOWBOUND: THE NEED FOR POWER

Liam followed Draven into the oppressive depths of the Dark Forest. The trees were taller and more twisted than before, their gnarled branches seeming to reach out and grasp at the very air. The forest's darkness was thick and palpable, an almost tangible force that wrapped around Liam, pressing against his skin.

The only sounds were the crunch of leaves underfoot and the occasional distant rustle, but the silence was heavy and suffocating.

Liam's mind raced as they walked in silence. Curiosity eventually got the better of him, and he broke the uneasy quiet. "Hey, umm… Draven?"

For several seconds, there was no reply. Draven's presence seemed to blend seamlessly into the darkness around them, and Liam wondered if the man had even heard him.

Finally, Draven's voice cut through the stillness, cold and indifferent. "Talk, kid."

Liam took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. "Does the sun ever rise over here?"

Draven's response was as detached as his demeanor. "Never. It's always dark in here. We might still be in the real world, but in this place… it's a completely different realm."

Liam mulled over Draven's words as they continued their trek. The notion of an eternal night unsettled him, but he tried to focus on the task at hand. After a while, he mustered up the courage to ask, "When will we arrive?"

Draven remained silent. Liam's question hung in the air, unanswered, and he decided not to press further. The forest seemed to stretch on endlessly, its dense shadows swallowing any hope of escape.

Minutes later, Draven abruptly halted. Liam almost collided with him before realizing they had arrived at their destination. The area before them was eerily quiet, the shadows more intense and the darkness even more oppressive.

"Where are we?" Liam asked, confusion and apprehension mingling in his voice.

"This is where your training starts," Draven said, his tone final and dismissive.

As if on cue, malevolent creatures began to materialize out of the darkness. They emerged with a grotesque slithering sound, their forms shifting and writhing as they took shape. The creatures had eyes that glowed an unsettling shade of crimson, and their mouths were filled with jagged teeth that seemed to drip with a dark, viscous substance.

Liam's heart raced. "Where did these creatures come from?"

He turned to look at Draven, hoping for some guidance or reassurance, but Draven was now seated against a nearby tree, his eyes closed and his posture relaxed. The contrast between Draven's calm demeanor and the menacing creatures was stark.

Panic surged through Liam. "What are you doing? Aren't you going to help me?"

Draven's eyes remained closed. "I'm not going to help you. Your training starts now, kid. Defeat these creatures by yourself."

The weight of Draven's words settled heavily on Liam's shoulders. He felt a surge of fear but forced himself to focus. The creatures were closing in, their eyes fixed on him with malevolent intent.

The first wave of creatures lunged at Liam. He tried to fight back, swinging his sword with all his might, but his movements were clumsy and ineffective. He recalled the flames and dark magic he had wielded earlier, but they were elusive and unpredictable.

Desperation drove Liam to action. He dodged and weaved, using his agility to avoid the creatures' attacks. His previous attempts at using his magic had been unsuccessful, but the urgency of the situation pushed him to try again. With each close call, he felt a flicker of the flames he had summoned earlier. He forced himself to focus on that sensation, willing the flames to emerge.

As the battle raged on, Liam managed to summon a small burst of flames. The creatures recoiled, and he could see the advantage this power gave him. He fought with renewed determination, the heat from the flames giving him the

upper hand. However, his control over the fire was still imperfect, and it flared unpredictably.

Just when it seemed that the creatures might overwhelm him again, Draven's voice cut through the chaos, offering a sliver of advice. "Focus on the flames, kid. Use them to drive them back. Don't let them control the fight."

Liam clung to Draven's advice, channeling his will into controlling the flames. He let the fire flow with his movements, using it to create a barrier between himself and the creatures. The flames danced and roared, pushing the creatures back and burning away their shadowy forms.

Despite his lack of precise control, Liam's determination to survive fueled his efforts. The creatures fell one by one, their grotesque forms disintegrating into the darkness. Liam's breaths came in ragged gasps as he fought, each victory against the creatures a testament to his growing resolve.

Finally, the last of the creatures fell, and the forest fell silent once more. Liam, drenched in sweat and panting heavily, looked around at the carnage. The ground was littered with the remnants of the creatures, and the oppressive darkness seemed to have lessened, if only slightly.

Draven approached, his expression inscrutable. "You managed to survive, kid. That's a start. But this is only the beginning."

Liam, exhausted but victorious, looked up at Draven. "Is this how all my training will be? Fighting for survival?"

Draven's eyes were hard but not unkind. "Yes. In the Dark Forest, survival is the only way to grow. You've shown you have the will to fight. Now you need to hone your skills and find control over your powers."

Liam nodded, his mind already focused on the next challenge. "I understand. I'll keep fighting and learning."

Draven gave a rare, approving nod. "Good. Now, get some rest. We have more training ahead. And remember, kid—out here, only the strong survive."

As Liam settled down to rest, the enormity of his journey ahead began to sink in. The Dark Forest was a place of relentless trials, but with each challenge, he was growing stronger. The path was treacherous, but Liam was ready to face it, one step at a time.