

The air in the Dark Forest was thick, suffocating. In the heart of the forest, where even the bravest souls hesitated to tread, time held no meaning. It had been a year—a year of relentless training, pushing boundaries, and confronting fears. Yet, the forest remained unchanged, its perpetual darkness as cold and oppressive as the day Liam had first entered.

The canopy above blocked out any sign of the sun, and the ground beneath was covered in twisted roots and decayed foliage. This place was eternal.

But Liam was not.

He stood across from Draven, breathing steadily, his body tense yet poised. His dark cloak flowed with the windless air as his red flames flickered, casting a crimson hue over his sharp features. A year ago, he had been just a shadow of what he was now. He had mastered control over his dark magic—well, almost. And the ****Veil of Flux****, once an elusive technique, was now a deadly tool in his arsenal.

Draven, his mentor and tormentor, circled him slowly. His dark eyes gleamed with the challenge that hung in the air. The two had been sparring for hours, but neither had gained the upper hand for long. Despite Liam's increasing mastery, Draven remained the immovable force, his decades of experience giving him an advantage no amount of raw power could surmount.

Liam's hand flexed as the myst within him stirred. His flames dimmed, shrinking to small flickers, as the air around him shifted—his ****Veil of Flux**** at work. His myst weakened, appearing fragile, nearly invisible.

"You're hiding," Draven remarked, his voice low and almost amused. He could sense the trick Liam was playing.

But Liam knew better. This was a battle of deception as much as strength. Without a word, he darted forward, his body almost a blur. Draven, too seasoned to be easily fooled, sidestepped the attack, but Liam had anticipated it. His myst flared, erupting outward as his flames surged with newfound ferocity, catching Draven off guard.

Flashback:

Liam had struggled for months, attempting to balance the flow of his myst while moving. He recalled the first time Draven had demonstrated the ****Veil of Flux****: the way Draven could turn his myst into a deceptive force, luring enemies into a false sense of security. Liam had spent countless hours trying to replicate it, often exhausting himself with nothing but frustration to show for it.

But then, one night, something clicked. His myst had responded to his will, flowing in and out like a tide, bending reality to his command. The moment had been fleeting, but enough.

End Flashback.

Their battle continued, a dance of red flame and shadow, weaving through the trees of the Dark Forest. Liam struck with precision—punches infused with flame, kicks laced with dark magic—but Draven parried and dodged, his experience countering each of Liam's attacks with deadly efficiency. Liam could feel the edge of victory in his grasp, yet every time he reached for it, Draven slipped away.

Draven's fist caught him in the side, sending a shockwave of pain through his ribs. Gritting his teeth, Liam staggered but quickly regained his footing. His myst flickered, the ****Veil of Flux**** shifting between amplified and weakened states, but Draven wasn't fooled this time.

"You've grown, Liam," Draven muttered, his breath steady. "But power alone won't save you."

With a sudden burst of speed, Draven closed the gap, locking Liam's arm in a tight hold. In a swift movement, he brought Liam to the ground, pinning him effortlessly.

Panting, Liam stared up at Draven, his frustration mixing with admiration. He had power, more than he ever thought possible, but Draven had experience—something far more dangerous.

"Experience wins battles," Draven said quietly, his voice carrying no malice. He extended a hand, helping Liam to his feet. "You still have much to learn."

Hours later, after the dust of their spar had settled, Draven's tone turned serious. They sat beneath a massive, dead tree, its gnarled branches clawing at the sky.

"You've reached a point where your magic needs to evolve," Draven began, his gaze steady on Liam. "There's something I haven't taught you yet—"

something only the most skilled dark magic users can wield. It's called **Extraction**."

Liam's curiosity piqued. He leaned forward slightly. "What is it?"

Draven crossed his arms, his expression darkening. "Extraction is the power to take the shadows of dead beings—creatures, humans, anything that's passed—and bind them to you. Their essence, their will, becomes yours. You store these shadows within your own, and they serve as an army, should you need them."

Liam's eyes narrowed. "An army of shadows?"

Draven nodded slowly. "But it's more than that. These shadows retain fragments of the souls they once belonged to. They are not mindless puppets, though they are bound to your will. But know this—each shadow you take carries weight. The more you extract, the heavier the burden on your myst and your mind.

The shadows must be controlled, or they will overwhelm you."

Liam looked at the ground, his mind spinning. It was a powerful technique, but the risks were clear.

"And if you lose control?" Liam asked, already knowing the answer.

"They will devour you," Draven replied coldly. "Your mind will fracture under their weight."

Liam remained silent for a moment, digesting the information. "How do I begin?"

Draven stood up, motioning for Liam to follow. "I'll show you."

As they moved through the dense forest, the howls of twisted creatures echoed in the distance. Liam's body was tense, anticipation building in his chest. They soon stumbled upon a pack of shadow beasts—creatures formed from the darkness of the forest itself.

"Kill them," Draven instructed. "And then extract their shadows."

Liam needed no further prompting. His red flames ignited once again, and in a swift motion, he tore through the creatures, their bodies dissipating into mist. When the battle was over, he stood among the remains, his breath ragged.

"Now, focus your myst," Draven said, his voice a commanding force. "Feel for the shadows they leave behind. They linger, waiting for someone to claim them."

Liam closed his eyes, reaching out with his myst. The air grew cold, and for a moment, he felt nothing. Then, slowly, a dark presence stirred beneath the ground—the shadows of the fallen creatures, slipping through the earth like tendrils of smoke. He focused, pulling on them.

One shadow twitched, then slid toward him, wrapping itself into his own. The sensation was strange—cold, heavy, but thrilling. He reached for another, and another came, but as he tried to pull in a third, a sharp pain erupted in his mind. His control wavered.

"Enough," Draven barked. "Two shadows. That's your limit for now."

Liam gasped, the weight of the extracted shadows settling into his body. It felt as if part of the forest had entered him, lingering in the corners of his soul.

They journeyed deeper into the Dark Forest, the path ahead darker than before. Liam battled more creatures, honing his magic, each fight sharpening his abilities. But the weight of the shadows he had extracted still lingered, like a constant whisper in his ear.

As they settled down to rest once again, Liam broke the silence. "How did you end up here, Draven?"

The older man remained quiet for a long time, his gaze distant. Finally, he spoke. "I woke up here, just as you did. No memory of how I got here."

Liam frowned. "That's it?"

Draven's jaw tightened. "That's all you need to know for now. I've been here longer than anyone else. Some seek the strength hidden in this forest, but most never return."

"And what about the knights who entered? The ones who survived?"

Draven's eyes flickered. "Some escaped. Others..." He trailed off, his tone growing colder. "There are things in this forest that even I don't fully understand. But you will, in time."

Liam leaned back, frustrated but knowing he wouldn't get more out of Draven tonight. As he lay down to sleep, his mind raced with thoughts of the **Extraction** technique, of the shadows he now carried.

Draven stared into the darkness, his thoughts turning inward. "Brother, looks like our dream might come true after all. Just a little longer."

His expression remained stoic, betraying nothing of the secret he harbored.