

Time had passed as it always does in the Forest of Kyrell, though it was impossible to say how much. Days blended into nights under the unyielding darkness, where no sun ever rose. Liam's body had transformed from when he first arrived, each battle chiseling him into something stronger, sharper.

His flames were no longer wild and untamed, but a force he could summon with ease, and his mastery of dark magic had reached incredible levels that surpassed even his expectations.

He had trained rigorously, day after day, mastering every skill and technique that Draven had thrown at him. ****Veil of Flux**** had become second nature, allowing him to manipulate the perception of his power with fluidity—sometimes showing weakness, other times amplifying his aura to intimidate or deceive his enemies.

****Extraction****, once a challenge, had now become a tool he could use without thought. The shadows of the forest's fallen creatures followed him like an army, though they remained unseen, waiting in his shadow until called.

And beyond that, Liam's physical prowess had increased to a near-legendary level. Draven's training regimen had pushed Liam to the very edge of survival, forcing him to hone his reflexes, strength, and endurance. Every muscle in his body was now a finely tuned weapon, working in perfect harmony with his magic.

Now, as they walked deeper into the forest, an unsettling silence surrounded them. The air was thick with an otherworldly presence. Liam trailed a few steps behind Draven, whose broad figure moved steadily through the shadowed trees, as if he knew exactly where they were headed.

Liam's curiosity sparked. "Draven...?"

"Talk, kid," Draven replied, his tone as cold and distant as ever.

"What's that feeling in the air?" Liam asked, his senses tingling with the oppressive myst swirling around them. "It feels like the myst is suffocating everything here."

Draven didn't answer right away, his eyes scanning the forest ahead. "You're finally starting to feel it. That's good," he said. "What does that tell you?"

Liam took a breath, closing his eyes for a moment as he tried to focus on the sensation. The thick myst hung in the air, vibrating with a strange energy, as if the very forest was alive and watching. "It means we're close. Really close...to Jamak."

Draven nodded approvingly. "Good."

They continued to walk, the trees growing darker and more twisted as they moved deeper into the heart of the forest. After a while, Draven came to an abrupt stop. He turned to Liam, his eyes cold but with an edge of intensity.

"Get ready, kid," Draven said, his voice low and ominous. "The creatures are coming."

But before Draven could finish, Liam cut him off. "I know," he said confidently, already sensing the malevolent presences closing in on them from the shadows.

Draven gave a slight smirk, impressed but saying nothing. He stepped aside, leaning against a large, gnarled tree. He folded his arms and closed his eyes as if he had no intention of helping Liam in what was about to happen.

From the darkness, grotesque creatures began to emerge—massive, twisted beings with elongated limbs and glowing red eyes. Their bodies seemed to shift and distort in the gloom, as though they were made of the very shadows they crawled from.

Liam braced himself, focusing on his myst as the first creature lunged at him. The battle was swift and brutal. Liam danced through the fray, his body moving with a grace and precision he hadn't known before. His flames erupted in controlled bursts, searing through the creatures' shadowy forms. One by one, they fell, but their numbers seemed endless.

Despite their strength, Liam now found them easier to deal with—he was faster, stronger, and more in control of his powers than ever before.

As he fought, Draven watched with silent approval. Liam had grown far beyond what Draven had anticipated. His myst was expanding rapidly, just through his use of flames alone. Draven couldn't help but think about what would happen when Liam fully embraced his dark magic in battle. If that day came, the boy might become something truly dangerous—not just to his enemies, but to everything around him.

When the last creature fell, Liam wiped the sweat from his brow and turned to face Draven, who stood up from his resting spot and motioned for them to continue.

"Not bad," Draven said as they resumed their journey. "We'll rest here for a bit."

Liam nodded, relieved. After weeks of relentless fighting, any opportunity to sit and recover was welcome. He sat down, catching his breath, but as his muscles cooled, the fire within him didn't let him rest for long. After just a short break, he was back on his feet, swinging his sword in a training exercise. His movements were fluid, almost instinctual at this point.

Draven watched him for a while before speaking. "What's your dominant hand, kid?"

Liam paused, surprised by the question. He twirled the sword in his right hand before answering. "I use my right hand... I think. Never really thought about it."

"Switch it," Draven ordered.

Liam hesitated for a moment, but then obeyed, shifting the sword to his left hand. To his surprise, he found that his left hand was just as comfortable, just as skilled. The sword felt perfectly balanced in his grasp, no different than when he held it in his right.

Draven's eyes narrowed, though his expression remained neutral. "Hmph. So, the heavens decided to bless you with power *and* the ability to use both sides perfectly," he thought to himself, though he didn't voice his amazement.

Liam, still processing the discovery, glanced at Draven. "I never noticed before..."

Before Liam could dwell on it further, Draven stood up and stretched both his arms. Out of thin air, two daggers materialized in his hands, their edges gleaming faintly in the dark. They were perfectly curved, the designs intricate, almost otherworldly in their craftsmanship.

Liam blinked in awe as Draven approached him, holding the daggers out. "Take these. You'll make better use of them than I ever could."

Liam took the daggers carefully, feeling their weight in his hands. They were perfectly balanced, light but strong. He looked up at Draven, genuinely appreciative. "Thank you."

Without another word, Draven returned to his spot by the tree, leaning back against the trunk. "Get some sleep, kid," Draven said coolly. "When you wake up, the final battle begins."

Liam stood there, stunned by the sudden shift in tone. "You think I'm ready?" he asked, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

"If I didn't think you were ready," Draven replied, "I wouldn't have given you those daggers."

Liam smirked at what felt like a rare compliment from Draven, then asked, "How do I store them? I'm not going to stop using my sword—it's the only thing I have to remember my grandfather by."

Draven gave a slight nod, then explained, "You can store them just like I did. Your dark magic can hold onto weapons as easily as it does shadows. It's not much different from **Extraction**."

Liam took a breath and focused. He envisioned the daggers being absorbed into his dark magic, and with a flicker of energy, they disappeared from his hands, dissolving into the shadows around him. He tried summoning them back, and sure enough, they reappeared in his grasp as if they had never left.

Draven observed with a hint of approval. "You're improving fast," he said quietly. "But get your rest. When you wake up, everything you've worked for will finally pay off."

Liam nodded, feeling a sense of both anxiety and excitement bubbling within him. As he lay down to sleep, his mind raced with the thought of what was to come. The final battle with Jamak was nearing, and he had to be ready for whatever awaited him in the heart of the forest.

The darkness around him felt less oppressive now, more like an old companion than a threat. He closed his eyes, letting exhaustion finally take over, trusting that when he awoke, he would be ready.