

The forest was silent.

An oppressive stillness clung to the air, thick with the weight of anticipation. The deeper they ventured, the more unnatural the quiet became, as if every living thing held its breath, waiting. It was a silence that carried the promise of something terrible yet inevitable—an end, one way or another.

Liam's steps were measured, his gaze fixed ahead. He walked behind Draven, his mentor who had guided him through the Dark Forest, teaching him everything he knew about combat, survival, and control. But there was something different about Draven's pace today. His usual assured stride slowed as they neared what Liam could sense was the heart of the forest—the place where Jamak waited.

Suddenly, Draven stopped.

Liam, confused, took a few more steps before halting and turning to face him. "Why did we stop?"

Draven didn't respond immediately. He stood there for a moment, staring into the thick shadows ahead, his jaw tight. Then, without turning, he said, "This is the farthest I can go."

Liam blinked in surprise. "What? Why?"

Draven finally looked at him, his eyes as cold and unreadable as always. "There's a force here. A boundary of sorts that prevents me from going any further. It's not something you can see, but it's there. The forest won't let me pass."

Liam's confusion deepened. "But...you saved me the first time I entered the Dark Forest. How could you—"

"I know," Draven interrupted, his voice firm. "And I paid for it. The forest punished me for stepping in when I wasn't supposed to. I don't have the right to fight any of the creatures beyond this point."

Liam furrowed his brow, trying to piece it together. "So, you're only allowed to guide me?"

Draven nodded. "That's right. My role is to guide those who enter this place seeking strength—nothing more, nothing less. The creatures beyond this point...they're not mine to fight."

There was something unsettling about the way Draven spoke, as if the forest itself were alive and enforcing these rules with a mind of its own. Liam had always known the Dark Forest was unlike any place he had ever been, but this only confirmed its mysterious and dangerous nature.

"Beyond here," Draven continued, "you're on your own."

Liam nodded slowly, accepting the reality of the situation. "I understand."

But before he could take another step forward, Draven spoke again. "One more thing, kid."

Liam turned back to face him.

"Jamak...he's different from anything you've faced so far. His power, intelligence, speed, strength—they're all leagues above what you've encountered in this forest. Even I couldn't take him down."

Liam listened carefully, his attention fully on Draven.

"You've fought a lot of creatures here, but none of them compare to Jamak. He's powerful. More powerful than me," Draven said, his tone dead serious. "And the moment you get close to him, the creatures will come at you relentlessly. They'll try to overwhelm you before you can reach him."

Draven then pointed to his head. "Use this. Think. Don't just rely on brute force. The creatures are strong, but they aren't invincible. If you want to survive, you'll need to stay one step ahead."

Liam took a deep breath, absorbing the information. Draven was never one for long speeches, but when he spoke, it meant something. "Got it."

Draven nodded once. "Good luck, kid. You've got what it takes. Now go prove it."

With that, Liam turned away and began his lone journey deeper into the forest. The thick, ominous trees seemed to close in on him as he walked, and the sense of dread only grew stronger. The forest was alive with a dark energy, pulsing with myst that clung to his skin like a cold mist.

After walking for a while, Liam suddenly stopped. His senses flared, alerting him to the presence of incoming threats. It was like a storm gathering on the horizon, ready to crash down on him.

In his mind, he began strategizing. If what Draven said was true, and the creatures were going to attack rapidly until he reached Jamak, then there was only one logical course of action. He couldn't afford to fight every single one of them by himself—not if he wanted to conserve his strength for the final battle. He would need reinforcements.

He summoned his ****shadow army****.

From his own shadow, dark, twisted figures emerged, the forms of creatures he had defeated in the forest. They stood beside him, silent and waiting for his command. He then summoned his ****daggers****, the weapons Draven had gifted him, feeling the familiar weight in his hands.

Liam stood still, his army surrounding him as he sensed the creatures closing in. The air shifted, and then, without warning, the first wave of grotesque beasts emerged from the shadows.

Without hesitation, Liam and his shadow army charged forward. The clash was immediate and violent. Liam's daggers slashed through the air, cutting through the creatures with ease, while his army tore into them, their forms moving like dark wraiths. The creatures snarled and shrieked, but they were no match for the combined strength of Liam's forces.

As the battle raged on, Liam moved with precision, dispatching one creature after another. His control over his myst was near-perfect now, and he effortlessly summoned flames to burn through the more resilient enemies. But as he fought, he wasn't just focused on defeating them—he was also ****extracting**** their shadows.

Each time a creature fell, Liam used his dark magic to pull its shadow into his own, adding to his army. His forces grew larger with every kill, and soon, the shadowy figures outnumbered the incoming creatures. The battle was turning in his favor.

Eventually, Liam no longer needed to fight. He stepped back, letting his shadow army handle the remaining creatures as he pressed forward. The pull of Jamak's myst was growing stronger, guiding him toward the center of the forest.

After what felt like an eternity, Liam finally reached his destination. In the center of a vast clearing sat a throne, dark and twisted, made of what looked like bones and stone. And on that throne sat ****Jamak****.

Liam's breath caught in his throat. The creature was enormous, at least seven feet tall, with a grotesque yet oddly humanoid form. His skin was dark and leathery, covered in strange, glowing symbols that pulsed with myst. Two large, curved horns jutted from his head, and his eyes gleamed with a malevolent intelligence.

His hands and feet were clawed, yet his posture was almost regal as he sat on the throne.

Despite the intimidating size and appearance, there was an air of calm about Jamak. He was waiting—waiting for Liam.

Liam, undeterred by the sight, stepped forward confidently. He twirled one of his daggers in his hand before pointing it at Jamak. "I don't know if you can

understand me," he began, his voice steady, "but I'm Liam Hunter. I'm the one who's going to kill you."

To Liam's surprise, Jamak smirked. The creature rose from his throne, his massive form towering over Liam. As he stood, his full height became clear, and the ground seemed to tremble beneath his feet.

Jamak spoke, his voice a deep, guttural rumble. "You... speak the tongue of men."

Liam's eyes widened. He hadn't expected Jamak to speak, let alone in a language he could understand.

"So, you can talk," Liam muttered.

Jamak's eyes gleamed with amusement. "You're brave. Foolish, but brave. You think you can kill me? I have lived in this forest longer than you can imagine. I have devoured thousands of souls stronger than you."

Liam felt a chill run down his spine but refused to back down. "That may be true," he replied, gripping his daggers tighter. "But you haven't faced me yet."

Jamak chuckled, a deep, rumbling sound that shook the air. "You are nothing but a child playing with forces you don't understand."

Before Jamak could finish, Liam dashed forward, his speed blinding. He swung his dagger towards Jamak's head, aiming for a clean strike. But Jamak moved with an eerie, effortless grace, dodging the attack as if it were nothing.

In the same motion, Jamak countered with a punch aimed directly at Liam's core. Even mid-air, Liam managed to block the strike with his arms, but the sheer force of the blow sent him flying backward, smashing through several trees before he finally came to a stop.

The impact left Liam stunned, his body aching from the collision. He coughed, wincing as he slowly got to his feet. His limbs felt heavy, but he was still standing.

And despite the pain, despite the power Jamak had shown in just that one punch, Liam felt something unexpected.

Excitement.

A grin spread across his face as he stared at Jamak, his blood pumping with adrenaline. His entire body buzzed with the thrill of the fight that was just beginning.