

Nystra City stood as a gleaming beacon on the southern edge of Zone Thirteen, its elegant buildings reflecting the golden sunlight. The streets were lively, filled with vendors and craftsmen selling their wares, a gentle hum of activity surrounding the city's residents.

Amidst the beautifully ornate structures was the Silverhart estate—a sizable yet modest home, known for the family's expertise in healing and doctoring. This residence doubled as a clinic for those in need, and it was here that Liam Hunter now found himself.

Inside the estate, the polished wooden floors reflected the grandeur of the house. Intricate tapestries lined the walls, showcasing ancient tales of healing and honor, while the scent of herbs and incense permeated the air.

Dr. Dain Silverhart, dressed in a fine gray tunic that accentuated his broad shoulders and silver hair, walked with a steady, calm authority through the halls. His steps were measured, his aura one of quiet control.

His apprentice, Mila, followed closely behind. Despite her conservative attire, the grace in her movement and her well-sculpted features were impossible to overlook. She was young, but her sharp eyes revealed a depth of knowledge and experience.

"Sir, all twenty-two patients brought in yesterday are stable, thanks to your treatment," Mila said, her voice soft but confident.

Dain smiled, a warmth that spread to his eyes. "You give me too much credit, Mila. You and the rest of the staff were the ones handling them. I simply guided you."

Mila smiled back but shook her head. "Without your expertise, we would've been at a loss."

Dain's laugh was low and genuine. "Perhaps. Anyway, how is our mystery patient faring?"

"It's been two days, and still no sign of him waking up. He's healing, but slowly," Mila replied, her tone shifting to one of mild concern.

Dain's brow furrowed in thought. "I'll take a look myself. He should be regaining consciousness soon."

They turned a corner and approached a door at the end of the hallway. The air grew quiet, more subdued as they neared the room. Dain gently pushed the door open, revealing a simple but well-kept space. Ane, a slender woman with dark brown hair tied in a neat bun, stood beside the bed. Her posture was impeccable, and her calm demeanor made her presence almost imperceptible.

"Good day, Ane," Dain greeted warmly.

"Good day, sir," Ane replied, her voice soft.

"Any changes?" Dain asked as he moved closer to the bed where Liam lay, covered in bandages.

"Yes, sir. Since sunrise, his hands have been twitching. I believe he's on the verge of waking up."

Dain's eyes narrowed in curiosity. "Then it won't be long."

As if on cue, Liam's eyelids fluttered. Slowly, he began to stir, his consciousness surfacing from the abyss. His senses came alive one by one—first the softness of the bed beneath him, then the muted sound of breathing and whispers around him. His eyes flickered open, adjusting to the light. He looked at Dain, Mila, and Ane before his gaze fell on the bandages wrapped around his abdomen and arms.

Without warning, Liam jolted upright, instinctively backing away to the far side of the bed, where a window let in beams of sunlight. His movement was swift but shaky, his muscles protesting the sudden action.

"Relax," Dain said calmly, raising a hand to signal no harm. "We're not your enemies."

Liam's cold stare darted between them. His stance was defensive, though weakened from his wounds.

"I understand your caution," Dain continued, keeping his voice level. "But you need to stay still. Your body is still recovering. Moving too much could reopen your wounds."

Liam glanced down again, assessing his injuries. His hand grazed the bandages on his abdomen, a sharp reminder of the battle he'd barely survived.

"Who are you people?" he asked, his voice rough from disuse.

"My name is Dr. Dain Silverhart," the man said evenly. "This is Mila, my apprentice, and Ane, my maid. We found you unconscious near the outskirts of Nystra two days ago. You were in a terrible state."

Liam's mind raced, trying to piece together the events. The forest... the fight... Jamak... Draven... The memories came crashing back.

"I tried healing you with magic, but your body..." Dain paused, clearly puzzled. "It resisted the healing process, almost as if rejecting it."

Liam's brow furrowed. Rejecting healing magic? How is that possible?

"It's not something I've seen before," Dain admitted. "You're a mystery, young man. But your injuries were severe, and I advise you to rest before making any rash decisions."

Without acknowledging the doctor's advice, Liam began unwrapping the bandages. Dain's expression shifted to one of alarm.

"Wait, you shouldn't—" Dain's voice trailed off as his eyes widened. The once grievous wounds were completely gone. Not a scar remained.

"Impossible," Dain whispered, more to himself than anyone else. "You were... How can this be?"

Liam ignored his astonishment. "Looks like I'm fine," he said bluntly, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. "Thank you for your care, but I'll be leaving now."

Mila, concerned, stepped forward. "Wait! You can't just leave. We haven't fully assessed your condition. And besides, you're... not dressed." Her voice was firm but polite.

Liam, only now realizing his state of undress, quickly grabbed the sheet and wrapped it around his waist. His face remained calm, but the slightest hint of embarrassment crossed his features.

"Fine," he muttered. "I'll stay. But I need clothes. Now." His eyes flashed with determination, and there was no mistaking the underlying force behind his words.

Dain, regaining his composure, nodded. "Of course. Mila, fetch something for our guest. He may be healed physically, but I have a feeling there's more to his story than meets the eye."

After receiving a fresh set of clothes—a simple black tunic and trousers—Liam stood at the entrance to the clinic, his sharp gaze drifting back to Dr. Dain. His posture was stiff, but his strength had clearly returned. It was as though the injuries had never existed. The healer and his attendants had done more than enough for him, yet he knew he couldn't stay.

He didn't belong in this world of calm and order. His path was far more chaotic, marked by shadows and flames.

"Thank you, Dr. Dain," Liam said quietly, inclining his head in a rare show of respect. "But I need to go. There's no place for me here."

Dain crossed his arms, his expression thoughtful but not surprised. He had expected as much from the young man. "I won't stop you, but do you even know where you're headed? It's dangerous out there, even for someone like you."

Liam's face was unreadable, his cold red eyes locking with Dain's. "No," he admitted. "But I'll find a place."

Dain gave a slow nod, sensing the stubborn resolve in Liam's words. It was clear that he wouldn't be swayed easily. "Fair enough. But before you go, would you allow me one thing?" Dain's voice was calm and respectful, though laced with a hint of concern.

Liam raised a brow, his gaze sharpening. "What is it?"

"A walk," Dain said, gesturing toward the door that led out into the city. "Nystra is a beautiful place. It won't take long. Just a few minutes before you head off to wherever you're going."

Liam hesitated. Part of him wanted to decline the offer and leave immediately, but there was something in Dain's request—something genuine and devoid of any ulterior motives. Finally, he gave a small nod.

"Fine. Just a walk," Liam replied, his tone clipped, but not dismissive.

They stepped out of the clinic and into the bustling streets of Nystra City. The sun was high in the sky, casting a warm glow over the intricately designed buildings. Merchants called out to passersby, offering goods ranging from rare spices to intricate jewelry.

Children ran along the cobblestone streets, their laughter filling the air, while nobles in finely tailored clothing moved about with grace.

Dain pointed to a grand fountain in the middle of a plaza, its waters cascading down in a serene display. "That fountain was built to honor the city's founder, a healer who led our people through the darkest days of the Demon War. Her magic saved countless lives. In a way, her legacy lives on through our family."

Liam walked silently beside him, his eyes scanning the streets and people, though his mind was elsewhere. The warmth of the city, the normalcy of it, felt alien to him.

"You seem like a man who's been through much," Dain continued, glancing sideways at him. "Your silence speaks volumes. I don't know where you came from, or what you've endured, but you're clearly more than just some traveler."

Liam remained quiet, the only sound between them being the click of their boots against the cobblestone. The bustling city seemed distant, a world away from the storm inside his mind. But something in Dain's words began to break through the wall Liam had built around himself. His time in the Dark Forest had made him forget what normalcy even felt like.

Eventually, Dain broke the silence with a subtle shift in topic. "Liam, I want to ask you something." He kept his tone light but serious. "You were found near the Dark Forest. But it's no longer there. It disappeared overnight, as though swallowed by the earth itself. Now, I'm not implying anything..." Dain paused, searching Liam's face for any sign of reaction.

"But if you know something, anything, about what happened, it could help us understand."

Liam's expression didn't falter, though his thoughts raced. The Dark Forest is gone? It didn't seem possible. That place had felt eternal, as though it had always existed and always would. But now, it was no more?

"I don't know how I ended up there," Liam said, his voice cold and unyielding. It wasn't entirely a lie. The circumstances of him leaving the forest were still unclear, since his memory was still not complete

Dain didn't press further. "Alright, I won't push you. But I'll ask again—please reconsider staying here. I can see you have nowhere else to go, and I know you're not ready to wander alone. Not yet." His eyes were sincere, though there was a quiet firmness behind them. "We have room, and it wouldn't be a burden.

You could stay with us, at least for a while."

Liam halted in his steps, the weight of Dain's words sinking in. He glanced around the city again, noting the harmony in its people, the structure of its society. It was so different from the world he had lived in, so different from the chaos of the Dark Forest.

He hadn't thought much about what he would do next—he only knew he needed to move forward, to survive. But where would he go? The memories

of the battles he fought in the forest weighed heavily on his mind, and the thought of wandering without a clear direction suddenly felt more overwhelming than it had before. And then there was the question that lingered at the back of his mind—the time.

"What year is it?" Liam asked abruptly, his voice sharp.

Dain blinked, caught off guard by the question. "It's 245 ADW—After Demon War."

Liam's heart stopped for a moment. 'Four years. I was in that cursed forest for four years.' He hadn't realized how much time had passed since he had entered the Dark Forest, but now the truth was laid bare before him. He had been lost for far longer than he thought.

Liam's resolve wavered for the first time. He had no idea what awaited him beyond this city, and wandering aimlessly now felt foolish. He needed time—to plan, to understand what had happened, and to find his place in this world that had moved on without him.

He exhaled slowly, turning to face Dain with a look of reluctant acceptance. "Alright. I'll stay. But only for a while."

Dain's expression softened into a gentle smile. "Of course, Liam. As long as you need."

Liam wasn't sure if it was a mistake, but for now, it seemed like the only choice he had.