

Chapter Twenty Four: A Lot To Learn - Part One

Evan gripped the golden sceptre tightly as the Oneron soldier led him farther into the compound. His guide, Andeo, had asked if Evan would like to leave his sword somewhere safe while in the outpost, and Evan had politely refused. While his father's broadsword was overly large and cumbersome for Evan's small size, he would not part with it for anything.

He had no real reason to mistrust these Oneron so far; they had seemed honest and hospitable – even the faint glimpses of their auras that Evan had picked up seemed to indicate no ill will against them. Secrets and guarded information, of course, but that was expected for a military outpost like this.

Nonetheless, he felt his shoulders tense as they came to their destination. Strong citrus and floral fragrances came from beyond the double doors, along with distinct woody, rustic smells. His immediate reaction was that they were about to enter another realm altogether, for surely those scents would not be found in a place like this.

The doors opened to a circular room with a domed, glass roof that streamed in the hot sunlight. Rows of tables were laid out which held plants and flowers of various nature, most of which foreign to Evan. Two small trees were on either side of the room, gnarled and twisted, reaching the glass roof.

Evan relaxed a little at seeing the rows of flora and allowed the myriad of scents to bombard him. He felt soothed even, somewhat reminded of the summers back home. He had never expected to sense anything on this desert planet that so strongly resembled his homeland.

"Welcome," said a young, cheery voice.

Evan had missed her earlier, but now saw a figure standing between the tables, partially hidden by the tall plants. She was younger than the other humans he had seen here so far, perhaps what they called a teenager, although it was hard for him to tell their ages, especially for Oneron who lived longer than a normal human.

The wavy hair lining her round face was black with a green sheen. Her large eyes gleamed as she looked up at them and smiled.

"Lady Melida," said Andeo. "Captain Liana wanted you to meet a guest of ours."

"Oh, really?" Melida said, raising her brows. She placed a tray on the table and came over to them. The tray held a few circular glass dishes with snippets of petals and stalks in them, along with a bulbous glass beaker. Evan had seen similar items in apothecary stores.

Melida wiped her hands as she came to them, her long purple robes swaying softly with her steps. She had a small frame, although was still a good foot taller than Evan.

Andeo gestured to the both of them. "Melida Serra, this is Evan Goodheart, a companion of General Sam Hawkings."

"Pleased to meet you," Melida said. Her skin had a pale reddish-hue, although not as strong as the local Canarrian's tones. "I'd shake your hand but they're a bit messy right now." She paused, her expression freezing. With no coloured splashes showing over her at that moment, Evan wondered what she was thinking.

"Thank you, Andy," she said, looking up at the soldier. "I'll look after our guest."

Andeo nodded and swiftly left the room, closing the double doors behind him.

"What is it you are doing here?" Evan asked, looking over the room.

Melida held her pleasant expression for a moment longer, almost becoming pensive, before she nodded behind her. "Come, let me show you."

He followed her around a table to where she had placed her tray. The plants and flower scents continued to bombard him, and he was comforted by their familiarity. The Voarn had a far greater range of senses than humans, but he was now sure that they also exceeded the senses of Oneron also, for there was surely no way Melida could stand to be in this room for any extended periods of time.

"So, this is our greenhouse, of sorts," Melida said, gesturing as she spoke. "We have all kinds of flora, most of which are the only ones of their kind on this planet. I use them to synthesise remedies and herbal extracts, and some provide us with food and nutrients."

"Herbal remedies?" Evan asked, looking over the strange plants on display. "You do not have a healer here, to cure ailments?"

"Oh we have all kinds of healers here, and I myself have studied some Restoration magic. But, you can't cure everything with magic. Like a cold, or a vitamin deficiency. And you wouldn't want to use magic all the time, anyway."

"It is a taxing art, true."

Melida played with a large leaf in her hands. "Well, not just the physical and mental exhaustion. Studies have shown that there can be some long-term side effects if a body is constantly exposed to magical influences. Although the findings are mostly inconclusive and theoretical at best. Anyhow, you wouldn't want to become too reliant on it for any old ailment."

Evan cocked his head in thought. "I have never heard of such long-term effects. We Voarn have used sorcery as part of our daily lives for centuries, and have never known any negative reactions to prolonged usage."

"I assure you there are multiple studies that say otherwise." There was a stern air to her as she regarded him, almost as if challenging him.

"I would not consider calling you a liar," Evan said diplomatically.

Melida nodded and smiled, her face relaxing. Her eyes shone with a dark green light as she searched him closely. "Maybe your DNA make-up is better suited to magic than ours. Or you've passed the threshold of long-term usage and have adapted to it. You're a very interesting person, Evan Goodheart."

Evan found himself smiling a little. "It is good to speak to another like-minded individual. I see you are well-versed in the sorcerous arts."

Melida smiled and curled a hair over her ear, turning to look over her tray. In the sunlight, Evan noted that her hair had shades of dark green among the black, like her eyes. In some ways she reminded him of the daughter of the Old Cenasure in his homeland. Back when the old Voarn had performed the ritual that had first showed James Island to Evan, his daughter had been greatly interested in being present and seeing a spiritual journey first hand. Evan looked away from Melida, becoming melancholic at the memory. He missed his people dearly.

"So," Melida said, "would you like to show me that sceptre on your belt?"

Evan met her eyes. A guarded moment passed over him, before he decided he would trust her, for now. "I would. Liana said you would be interested in it."

"Interested?" Melida said, raising her brows. "I felt that thing before you even came into the room. Where did you get it?"

Evan unclipped the sceptre and held it out for her. "It came into my possession, from a local huntsman. He claimed to have discovered it in a cave somewhere nearby. I have since had someone else determine it to be very powerful, and very dangerous."

Melida's hands hovered over the sceptre, perhaps getting a feel of it, before taking it carefully with both hands.

Evan noted the moment both their hands were on the sceptre, and the buzzing vibration that flared briefly. Was that the power of the sceptre, or did it come from Melida? Or perhaps it came from him, or that demon within him. So far it had yet to show its presence, since Evan had bound himself with it.

Melida held the sceptre closer to her head, as if listening to it. "This is something... big. I can feel it."

"Something dangerous?"

Melida's eyes gleamed as she looked at him. "Something special. May I examine it? I mean, together, of course. I assume that's why Liana wanted us to meet."

Evan regarded her. She had an amiable, agreeable air about her, which in turn made him slightly on guard. He had to wonder why she was being so friendly with him, and couldn't help but feel there was more to it. She seemed far too intrigued, and far too intriguing.

"I would like that," he eventually said.

"Great, let's get started."

"Let's get started," Liana said.

She had brought James to a large hanger under the outpost, accessed via an elevator. It must have stretched five hundred feet to the back wall, and the rafters were at least two hundred feet above them. Thin metal towers with connecting beams were placed around the large area, like tall trees scattered around. A glass booth was near the entranceway, with a row of lockers and a bench along the wall beside it. A section of the floor near them was comprised of a faint grid pattern, around thirty by thirty, the squares a little over a foot in length and width.

"This is the Training Hall," Liana said, waving an arm to encompass the enormous space. "It's modelled after the training chambers Oneron have used for centuries. Before that it was a hanger bay for our larger aircraft, but we no longer keep them here. There are a few different types of training you can do here."

Looking over the room, James ran his hands over the new shirt Liana had given him. The cream top was loose and soft, and the sleeves were shorted than he was used to, exposing some of his shoulder. He'd only bought his other shirt the day before, but it had been a long few hours under the desert sun to get here, so he welcomed the change.

Liana leaned through an open window of the booth and reached towards the console inside. The floor grid lit up, faint yellow lines showing the sections clearly.

"This is called the Time Grid. The idea is to keep moving at all times." Liana walked over to the lockers and opened one. "A timer is set to go off if pressure is left on a square for too long, so you have to keep moving and not stay in one spot." She gestured to his toughlets. "Those armlets you have, you can leave them to the side if you like. They look cumbersome."

James looked over the bulky toughlets on his forearms. He had wondered why he still wore them, but now the time came to remove them, he realised he wasn't ready to take them off. Maybe he would eventually go back to work – the thought was a weak one, as a big part of

him felt that he would never return to Tyken Town. Events seemed to keep moving him further away.

"I'm good keeping them on," he told Liana.

"You sure? We have some nice vambraces to replace them with, if you'd like? Some are almost as chunky as those, but much lighter."

James shook his head. "I'm used to them."

Liana shrugged as she typed into the console. "Okay then. But you won't need your sword for this, so you can put that aside."

James unclipped the sheath from his hip, and was glad to be rid of that at least. He had handled himself well enough the few times he had used the sword, but still wasn't comfortable wielding it. He also unclipped his grapple hook and knife, and laid them on the ground beside the sword.

The wall in front of him held several large swords on hooks, all displayed facing downwards. They all looked to be of a similar design. Very wide and long blades that curved into a point at the tip, and at the end of the long handles there was a diamond-shaped knife, that gave the swords an extra-long appearance. James had thought that Evan's broadsword was huge, but some of these matched and even exceeded his in length and width.

"Those are impressive swords," James said, voicing his thoughts.

"They are Maldrinn's," Liana said from within the booth. "Traditional Oneron swords."

"All Oneron use them?" James asked.

"Most do. Every military organisation still uses them. Although there are many Oneron these days that prefer a different sword type."

"Sam never mentioned them before." James had thought it strange that Sam wielded a sword he got from Tyken Town. Which meant that he hadn't had his own sword before he moved there.

Liana remained focused over the console, typing in commands.

James patted himself down to see if he had any other loose items, and noted something in his back pocket. He pulled out the photo card. When James had opened the package that he had inadvertently delivered for himself to Den's house, there had been two items inside: his father's grapple hook and this photo.

Liana left the booth and came to him.

James raised the photo to her. He saw that the faint scars on his palm were showing, and took the photo in his other hand, not wanting to explain his failure at conjuring fire. "Do you recognise either of these men?"

Liana tilted her head and brought her face close to James as she stood beside him, causing his pulse to race a little. Her olive skin looked so soft, yet there was a hardness to her.

"They're Oneron soldiers," James added. "This photo came with that grapple hook, which belonged to my father, Hayden Island."

There were two men in the photo, soldiers in armour. One was tall and dark-haired, with a hard edge about him. The other was fair-haired with a kinder smile.

Liana nodded and pointed to the fair-haired man. "Yep. I recognise one of them, of course, but I've never met him in person."

"Jacob Roby," James said, recalling the name. "Den Keenosh said he knew my father. You know of him?"

Liana remained looking thoughtfully at the photo, but James realised she had paused. She eventually looked up and met his eyes, her face even closer to his. "Jacob Roby. Actually I don't really know of him that well. Just heard the name, you know. Den Keenosh gave you the photo?"

"It was in a package the grapple hook came in. It was sent to me – well, it's a little complicated. I was ordered from work to deliver the package to Den's house. But when I went there I found out the package was actually for me to open." He left out the part where Evan's family crest had somehow been placed on the package also, which neither Den or Sam could explain. "Den couldn't tell me much about the photo, but said that it must have some significance if my father wanted me to have it."

Liana shook her head. "I don't recognise the other guy."

"His name is Harman Bridges, apparently."

She shook her head again and stepped back. "I'm not the one to help you with that, I'm afraid. I'll ask my father if he knows them though, and I'll let you know."

James nodded and glanced at the photo again. Liana's voice had shifted somewhat, and he couldn't help but get the feeling she wasn't telling him something. He placed the photo beside the grapple hook, and wondered if keeping secrets was part of being an Oneron. Maybe he was just being paranoid. Maybe she knew Jacob Roby better than she said, and didn't want to reveal any more about him.

"So," Liana said, urging James towards the centre of the grid and standing beside him.

"Basic moves to warm up, before we get started on the timer. Punches and kicks. Hands up,

knees bent. Strongest foot back." She assumed a fighting pose with her fists in front of her, and James did the same, standing beside her.