

## Chapter Thirty Four: Good Enough - Part Two

"What are you talking about, man?" Jorak asked.

Den continued as if he hadn't spoken. "For the longest time, Raylan struggled with the military life. It left him a deeply troubled man. Throughout the years, through the campaigns and battles and training, Raylan sought for something greater. Something to help him become the strongest soldier he could possibly be. He caught word of a legendary Grand Oneron, Kengarro Eldershan, who was known to have a greater understanding of the ways of the universe beyond all others. Raylan believed he was destined to meet Kengarro."

"Kengarro Eldershan," Liana said quietly. "He was a madman."

A pained smile came over Den, who still looked at the ground. "Raylan soon discovered that. With the help of a Thorinion sorcerer named Kai, Raylan was able to enter the Illusion Realm, where Kengarro resided. But Kengarro was a severely unhinged individual, and their meeting led to a battle of the minds, with both Kengarro and the sorcerer Kai battling each other inside Raylan's head. The effects were brutal to him, but, he was able to break free from the Illusion Realm with Kai's help.

"Raylan returned home after the Zell Wars ended. He watched his son grow up, and Raylan went on to become a General in a grand army, growing much prestige. Life was good, or so he believed. Cracks started to show, his mind playing tricks on him, and for a while he believed he was truly losing his mind. He began to wonder if Kengarro still maintained some kind of hold on him."

Den paused. He brought a hand to his mouth and steadied his breath. He still could not look any of them in the eye. "After some time, Raylan met a woman, Cerina Andassa, the chief war secretary of Master Commander Skydis Fashgrando. Their full names had a relevance that became clear much later. Despite Raylan's devotion to his wife and son, despite his better judgement, he soon began an affair with Cerina, who had a powerful hold over him. It was around this time that a psychotic sorcerer named Eraagas Sokrul, who after a few confrontations, took a personal interest in killing Raylan." Den paused once again, this time to take a sip of his drink.

Sam couldn't believe what he was hearing. He thought he had known Den so well, especially in these past few years.

Jorak took the moment to say, "Apologies, but, I have a question. You served in the Iron Guard Regulars, correct? I'm familiar with their forces, and there was no Master Commander Skydis Fashgrando, and I have never heard of a Cerina Andassa."

Den placed his glass on the table and leaned back, readjusting his position. When he finally met Jorak's eyes, his face was blank, as if he had no emotion left to give.

"That is because none of this was real," Den said. "With his affair exposed, Raylan lost his wife and son. Eraagas Sokrul was destroying what was left of his life, and the only thing that seemed to be on his side was a travelling merchant. A strange man who went by the name of Petas Elquin. He told Raylan that his life could be changed. To what extent, Raylan could not comprehend at the time. He desperately tried to reconcile his relationship with his wife and son, and for a while that seemed to be a possibility. But when Eraagas assaulted Raylan's home, his wife and son were killed. It was during this attack that Raylan's leg was broken by a devastating magic. An injury that could not be healed by any means. Raylan had lost everything, and for a while he considered taking his own life."

Den's intense stare caught Sam and locked on to him. At that moment, Sam could have cried at seeing the pain in Den's eyes, and learning the true extent of his past trauma. He was telling them this story for Sam, and it was tearing him apart. Their silent look told Sam everything.

"It had been over thirty years," Den went on, now solely speaking to Sam, "since Raylan battled with Kengarro in the Illusion Realm. Raylan thought he had escaped, and went on to live the rest of his life. He soon came to realise, with the help of the merchant Petas, that his life from that point had been an illusion. He was still trapped in the Illusion Realm, a prisoner of Kengarro. You see, the war secretary Cerina Andassa was a piece of Kengarro, a temptress that sought to break Raylan's spirit. Eraagus Sokrul was another representation of Kengarro, an enemy for Raylan to face. And it was Petas Elquin, the strange merchant, who had been able to see through the illusion. For Petas was actually Kai, the Thorinion sorcerer who had managed to enter Raylan's false world and attempted to set him free.

"Raylan led an army to Eraagus's stronghold and attacked his forces. He knew that defeating Eraagus in this world was the key to overpowering Kengarro's hold of his mind. Raylan eventually won the battle and destroyed Eraagus, and was blessed with freedom. But when Raylan returned back to the real world, he was faced with a greater tragedy. The past thirty one years trapped in the Illusion Realm was real enough that he had aged in that time, and burdened with all the memories there, but only minutes had passed in the real world."

A silence followed as Den seemed to search for his next words. "Eraagus Sokrul. Cerina Andassa. Petas Elquin. Three entities that held the key to Raylan's freedom. That their initials spelled *escape* was perhaps a cruel irony."

Den was unable to look at them again, appearing lost in his memories. Liana was quietly crying.

"Raylan was completely lost. He couldn't go back to his real wife and son, not after everything he had gone through. He couldn't stand for anyone to see him suddenly aged over thirty years. With his leg still broken, and no way of being healed, he went to the only person he believed he could trust; an old friend. Raylan sought help from Hayden Island, who took him in and helped him return to some semblance of normality. After some years, Hayden finally convinced Raylan to return to the military life. Raylan agreed, and with

Hayden's help, he became known as Denneron Keenosh, and taken in by Ghannim's Oneron Training Academy. I trained young soldiers there for many years. And it was there I came to learn about Hayden's son, James, who required protection away from the military life. It made sense to me, that my life would come full circle, and that I would return to my birth planet. Here, I reconnected with Tam Borral, the grandson of a childhood friend, and we set up the plan of watching over James, arranging his new life here."

Den became silent and had gone still. No one moved or made a sound for a long moment.

"Den," Jorak eventually said, clearing his throat. Den slowly turned to face him. "I had no idea, friend. I can't imagine anyone going through that, and coming out a sane person."

"I don't know how anyone could have survived that," Liana said quietly. She had brushed away her tears, leaving her cheeks and eyes reddened. "Oh, Den..."

Den held a hand up and gave her an encouraging smile. "I am quite all right. This is all in the past. It does not affect who I am now. As far as I'm concerned, Raylan Wensyn is dead and buried, and his life does not affect mine."

"But," Liana said, "your wife, and son."

Den made a sad, grandfatherly smile filled with affection. "They are Raylan's family. Den and Hayden made sure they were looked after and were able to move on with their lives, after Raylan was killed in action. But I have made peace with it all." Den turned to Sam.

Sam knew something was coming.

"You may have gathered the point of my story, Sam," Den said. "I can tell you that it's possible, despite how hard things may seem, to move on from a great trauma, and become a new person. Our friend James is learning to be a new person, without a past, and you can learn to be a new person also, using your past as a stepping point. You don't need to go to the extent that Raylan did, of course. You can accept your past for what it is, and move on. All you can do, all anyone can do, is try."

"Once we stop trying," Jorak said, "we lose ourselves. My grandfather told me that once. It stuck with me all this time."

Sam's throat tightened. Their looks weighed him down. He knew Den was right. A part of him knew they were all right. He had spent so long denying who he really was, he had started to believe it. But now the time was here for him to return to his path – to pick up his sword and grapple hook – he wasn't sure if he could do it.

Throughout Sam's life, he'd never felt like he was good enough, or strong enough. And there were so many events, large and small, that reinforced that belief. Sam had vowed to never lose another man under his protection. But now, James was his responsibility.

Sam the soldier needed to return. He just didn't know if he could do it again.

He nodded, at first staring at the table, and then looked up at them all. He swallowed, working out the lump in his throat.

He sat forward and reached for his glass. "I could use another drink."