

Chapter Twenty Two: The Road Ahead - Part One

James swallowed through a dry throat. "What was that?" He turned to Sam, but his friend still studied the distance where Tallas had landed.

Castan brought the whinnying mousslo's closer. "Ho, boy," he said as he came to them. "Some excitement you fellas find. I should be paying *you* for the entertainment."

"Was that a jump, Sam?" James asked. "You said Oneron can only jump, what... thirty, forty feet?"

"I did say that," Sam said, still looking ahead.

"Well that guy Tallas just hit the horizon." James waved a hand ahead to emphasise his point.

"Aye," Sam said. He finally met James's eyes. "As he said, he's not an Oneron. But, somehow I don't believe that."

"He is no Oneron," Evan said. When they all looked at him, he added, "I could feel a god's touch on him. I have only felt such power on two other occasions, and both were in the presence of a god."

"What does that mean?" James asked.

"I do not know of this god you call Menas," Evan said. "But that man was more than a priest."

"We can agree that he was not what he seemed," Sam said.

Castan breathed a heavy sigh. "Well I don't rightly know what an Oneron is, or who this Menas is, but this is all mighty fascinating, to say the least." He pulled on the leather reins as the mousslos stirred beside him.

"I'd say so too," Sam said. "You did good, Castan. You keep your cool. Now, how's about we continue on to Riondon? I could do with some more time off my feet. What do you say, tour guide?"

Castan nodded, smiling cheerfully. "Good idea." He handed them each the reins to their mousslos and they remounted the beasts.

As they urged their mounts forward, Castan went on. "Now to the side, you will see the bloodied remains of a... Hakkoo dragon, long ago vanquished by a legendary hero, who the locals took to calling a Super Oneron, on account of his greatly exaggerated powers that resembled those of an Oneron." He leaned closer to Sam, adding in a loud whisper, "Does that sound about right?"

Sam chuckled. "About right."

"Good," Castan said.

James leaned forward and rested against his mousslo's neck, comforted by its soft mane on his cheek. His head swam with fatigue. Flashes of the armoured dragon and devastating beams of light raced through his mind.

"That dragon said he was sent to find us," Evan said.

"He wasn't looking for us," James said glumly, looking up. "He was looking for me. He named me."

Sam nodded. A severe, troubled look was on him, furrowing his brow. "Aye. Which means that our presence, and our intentions, are known to more parties than we thought. Someone wanted to stop us reaching Riondon."

"Jaxx?" James offered. "Maybe he knows we're coming to see him, instead of Dr. Velome."

"Maybe," Sam said. "But that dragon came from off-planet. Maybe Jaxx communicated with the Haarkbaah Dragons and sent one of them to us. But, sending a giant dragon to kill us seems a little like overkill, right?"

James thought on this. "Well, who knew that a Super Oneron would be in the area to save us?"

Sam's expression soured. James got the sense that he did not appreciate the 'Super Oneron' nickname for the mysterious Tallas.

"We were lucky, aye," Sam said thoughtfully.

"We need to be extra vigilant," Evan said. "Now that we know there are greater dangers out there. It will no longer be a simple matter of walking up to this Higeron Jaxx and speaking with him."

A silence came over them as they considered Evan's words.

The rocky ground gave way to a gravelly sand, gradually shifting to a deeper yellow colour, as they ventured farther into the dunes. They travelled for some time with Castan silently steering them.

Both Sam and Evan held slight grimaces, James noticed, as they fought through their injuries. At one point, James thought he saw a dull green light come from within Evan's desert cloak, and wondered if the Voarn was restoring himself with some quick minor healing. Or maybe James had imagined it. He wondered if Sam had done, or would do, something similar to keep himself going.

James regarded Castan's back, silhouetted against the blazing sun ahead of them. He realised they shouldn't have been speaking so openly about their situation in front of him, but their guide seemed to pay little attention to them. In fact, Castan was currently focused on a little bird flying over them.

Castan let out a long, drawn out whistle. The blue bird—no larger than a fist—circled over them. It fluttered and responded with its own melodic whistle. "Someone supports your journey, at least," Castan told them.

"The bird?" Evan asked.

"Aye, aye," Castan said. "That there is a mil'o. The Blue Luck, we call it. If you whistle to it, and it whistles back, it brings good luck to you. A nice bit of fortune for us."

That sounded good to James. He had seen pictures of the mil'o before but had never heard of them bringing luck. It was likely just a Canarrian superstition, but he liked the idea nonetheless.

"And if it does not return your whistle?" Evan asked.

Castan shrugged. "Well, that means nothing."

"We'll take all the luck we can get," Sam said.

Still looking up in the sky, a sense of dread came over James. He felt so exposed right then. Feeling that at any moment another enemy could appear and attack them. Another enemy that wanted him, in particular, dead. He shivered and shook the thoughts away, telling himself not to be so paranoid.

The sun had cleared the distant mountains and now bathed the world in its warm, persistent light. The heat embraced James, wrapping around his tingling skin like a familiar friend. The warmth reminded him of sunny days out in the parks in Tyken Town. He squinted at the bright light, and his fatigue closed his eyes all the way as he laid his head back against the mousslo's neck. He hadn't realised how much he'd been running on adrenaline, and now his exhaustion was catching up to him. He rested for some time, drifting in and out of consciousness as the morning went on.

They were still riding when James eventually awoke. The sun was higher in the sky – perhaps an hour or two had passed. Castan and Evan rode ahead, while Sam was near James's side. Sam had been keeping an eye on him, James realised.

James swallowed, finding his throat dry. He asked Sam for a water bottle from his satchel, and he handed him one. As James drank, he wondered how long it had been since they'd left Toolin.

"Is that a chair?" Evan said, looking to the north where the land flattened.

James rubbed the sleep from his eyes and focused. A tall rock formation stretched upwards, and it did somewhat resemble the formation of a high-backed chair. Actually, a second rock structure beside it looked like a giant table; four columns of long, knobbly legs and a flat surface on top. It took him a moment to recognise the structures from the Medropon historical books, and he smiled, finally seeing the landmarks in person.

"Aye," Castan said, dabbing his sweaty forehead with a cloth. "The Peda Effra Steps. You see to the side, the mountain rises in sections like giant steps? That's where they get their name from."

"A place of giants," Evan muttered thoughtfully.

Castan glanced at him. "Right, right. It's said that giants built that chair and table long ago. Leftovers of their time in this land."

"Of course," Sam said, "it could just be a rock formation that looks a bit like a table and chair."

Castan shrugged, "And maybe the rain is a god's tears."

"There's meant to be a treasure chest, too?" James asked. "I read it in a book."

Castan nodded eagerly. "Aye, over on the other side of the mountain. Now that one cannot be explained by nature. It's a real chest, made out of metal, bigger than a house. No one has ever been able to open it. So you can say what you like about the rocks looking like this and that, but I'd like to hear how you explain the giant treasure chest."

"Its contents must only be meant for the giants," Evan said.

Castan gave him a look of admiration. "You're a good client, you are. The world needs more open-minded folk like you."

Sam brought out a sat-com. James had lent his one to him after Sam's was lost in his old satchel in the Grillock Caves. Sam stared at the device for some time, frowning and looking thoughtful, before he began typing into it.

"Tam?" James asked, wondering if their foreman was still keeping in touch. Maybe he had called James while it was in the satchel.

Sam shook his head, looking distracted as he returned the sat-com to his side. He pointed his chin ahead. "Just over those dunes, we'll rest a bit. How does that sound?"

"Whatever the clients wish," Castan said.

James continued to watch Sam, aware he had avoided his question about who he was contacting. Maybe Sam was messaging Den Keenosh. James wondered where the old man had gone to after they left him in Tyken Town.

It took them another hour or so to crest the rocky dunes, where they could see the surrounding land better. Far to their left – West, James guessed – the end of the Dusk Mountains lowered and broke into a series of smaller ranges and foothills. Ahead of them, a long grey road stretched into the horizon. That would have been the main road they were avoiding, James figured.

A low rumbling sound carried in the wind. James startled and his eyes shot up to the sky, frantically searching for the ship. A Redcraft; he just knew it. When he saw the transport ship high up in the sky, no more than a long black shape at that distance, his shoulders sagged with relief. Just a passing public craft; probably the first of the morning.

When they came to an open section of flat ground, where a few leafless trees and shrubs littered the area. James was relieved when Sam called them to stop. It was clear they all welcomed the rest as they climbed off the mousslo's. Evan gulped from his water bottle and Castan dropped to the ground, rubbing his face with his cloth.

James sighed and stretched his aching muscles. His injured side felt a little better but was still sore, and the skin around it felt bruised.

"There's a hope that you folk brought some sustenance for your journey?" Castan said, lying on his back with his eyes closed, his face to the sun

"That hope would be well founded," Sam said. He reached into his satchel and brought out the wrapped parcels Tabetha had made for them. He threw one to each of them, and also tossed Castan the rest of his own water bottle. Castan celebrated with a fist to the sky and gratefully joined them.

Something fell from Sam's satchel as he removed the parcels. The heavy sack clinked dully on the ground, half out the satchel. James recognised it as the bag of gold with which Audlin had tried to buy Evan. Sam scooped the sack up and folded his satchel closed.

They ate in silence for a while. Sam hardly touched his food James noted. He mostly just stared into the distance with a troubled look. Something was weighing on his mind.

Evan went to the mousslo's, who were roaming nearby, and allowed them to drink from his water bottle. They were apprehensive at first, before they realised what Evan had for them.

"They like you," Castan said to Evan.

"They are good beasts," Evan said, patting a mane.

When Evan sat back down, he mostly nibbled on the honey bread, unable to keep his face from souring with each taste. James felt a little sorry for him, so far away from the flavours and cultures of his homeland. But of course James was also far away from whatever home he had known. At least he enjoyed the local cuisine.

"So tell us about yourself, Castan," Sam said.

Castan swallowed a mouthful before saying, "Very simple, me. Been in Medropon my whole life. I was a fisherman by trade, originally from Ipan, in the north."

"Ipan was recently freed from its occupying force, right?" Sam asked.

Castan smiled. "With Victory City's help, yes, last year. Although they have a long way to get to where they were before. Haven't been to Ipan for many years now, though."

"You have any family here?"

Castan shook his head.

"And now you spend your days as a guide?"

"Something like that, aye. Well I know just about every corner of Western Medropon."

Their talk eventually led to Castan telling Evan a story about some of the roaming animals. He seemed to enjoy telling a story whenever one occurred to him.

Getting the impression that Castan would continue talking for some time, James brought out the magic book from Sam's satchel. Tabetha had insisted it would help him with his magical training, even if James had not mentioned any such training to her. For now, during their rest, he would do what he enjoyed the most: read. He would also enjoy some time to himself, having spent so much time around other people. Sometimes it was good to just recharge and be silent, without the worry of conversation. It was a pleasure that James long missed.

He opened the book to a section about Silk Magic, something he had little knowledge of. The passage was titled *The Breaking of the Silk Realm*. It spoke of the shattering of the Silk Gynen Crystal, millennia ago, and how thousands of pieces had spread across the galaxy.

Another page mentioned the various sub-classes of magics. Water being a sub-section of Ice, and Thunder from Wind. It seemed like there was a lot to every aspect of magic he had no even been aware of.

"Anything good in there?" Sam asked.

James looked up from the book, realising he had become lost within its pages. "There's a lot to take in."

"We can assume all magical knowledge and experience was taken from you, too," Sam said. "I'd heard you were quite a talented wielder."

"The old James certainly sounds like an exceptional soldier," Evan said. James had expected a bitter tone, but there was none. Evan sounded genuine. At least, James thought so. Maybe Evan really was taunting him as usual.

"He was," Sam said. "And still is, given time."

"Soldiers, aye," Castan said, gesturing with his food. "Explains all the fighting you like to do."

"We all have our hobbies," Sam muttered good naturedly.

A silence fell over them. They were all clearly tired and needed the time to rest, having been through so much in a short time. James looked over the book with unfocused eyes.

"I must say," Evan said, swallowing a small nibble of bread, "that I have always endeavoured to progress with my sorcery training. I was always told I had a considerable talent, more so than my peers, but have never quite felt like I was pushing myself as much as I could."

"A wasted pursuit," Castan said in a voice tight. "A fool's gift, magic is."

"Had a bad experience or two?" Sam asked.

Castan shrugged. "It's a devilish ability, not meant for this mortal plane. Should've stayed with the gods, not given to us."

"It depends how you use the gift," Evan said. "There are some very dark, very dangerous powers in the galaxy, for certainty. Sorcery is shaped by the intentions of the user."

"Well my intention is to stay away from it," Castan said. "So that sounds like a good shape to me."

"The Voarn were originally born from magic," Sam said, "or I believe I read that once."

"That is one theory," Evan said. "We have multiple origins, if you look far back enough. Most records refer to us as the children of Andaano. The Voarn god."

"Sounds like the Oneron," Sam said. "A hazy entry into this galaxy, the true beginning lost throughout history. What's known was collected from the earliest record keepers, and their theories." Sam reached for a slice of honey toast and began tearing a piece off. "I was always capable at best, with magic. Basic training, some high-level theoretical studies, but never felt it was for me. Always felt better with a sword in my hand."

James closed the book with a heavy breath, and eyed Sam. "Okay, Sam. Let's do it. Let's give magic a try."