

Chapter Twenty Three: The Oneron Way - Part Two

"Any trouble getting here?" Liana asked as they entered.

The room contained two curved sofas around a simple metal table, with some desks and shelves along the grey walls. There was a stark, basic feel to the room. No decorations or luxuries. Two windows let the bright, warm light in, revealing specks of dust motes in the stuffy air. Looking over the cracks and holes in the walls, James thought about taking a vat of caulk and filling in the gaps. It was an old habit of his, he realised, left over from his time as a construction worker.

A blocky mech plodded over to them from the far corner, beeping inquisitively. It looked like a chest of drawers with stumpy legs.

"Actually, we did get a visit from a Haarkbaah Dragon," Sam said.

Liana paused as she entered a command into the mechs keypad. "A what?" The mech powered down with a low whine.

Sam shrugged and sat down on a sofa. "Good question. It came from off-world, saying it was sent to stop us going any further. It called James by name."

Liana finished opening a window and then took a metal chair, placing it beside Sam. James sat on the second sofa with Evan, who adjusted his large sword and sceptre as he sat. The curved sofa formation allowed them all to face each other.

"Named James," Liana said, frowning. "That's not good. Well, I'm glad you made it past the dragon."

"That's a story for another time," Sam said.

Liana raised her eyebrows. She cast a cursive look over them. Once again the depth in her eyes took James by surprise as they fell on him. "You fellas look like you've been through hell."

The door opened and the first soldier she had sent away entered. James tried to remember names, but had forgotten this one. The man lowered a tray with four tall glasses onto the table.

"Thank you, Andeo," Liana said, smiling at the man. "That's all for now. See if my father needs anything, would you?"

"Of course," Andeo said. He nodded curtly and left the room, closing the door.

Liana gestured towards the drinks that contained a yellow liquid. "Help yourselves, please."

"Sagka," Sam said, licking his lips and taking a glass. He raised it to James. "Yalosa-gka. A nutrient drink, very filling. Very potent. One glass is like having a full meal, without the bloating after."

"That sounds good to me," James said, picking up a glass. The creamy liquid looked thick, and he was glad to see it was cold. He drank some, tasting vanilla and some fruits, and felt refreshed almost immediately. It was like a punch of clarity had hit him, clearing his mind. "Wow, that's some drink."

Evan hesitated before taking a tentative sip. James braced himself for a disgusted reaction. Evan paused thoughtfully, and then drank some more. "Impressive," he said, studying the drink.

"Look at that," Sam said, leaning back. "The first thing that our Voarn friend has liked on this planet, and it's a good old fashioned Oneron concoction." He sipped his own drink some more. "Ahh. I've missed this."

Liana leaned back on her chair and folded a leg under her. The fourth glass remained on the tray.

"How's Hank doing?" she asked Sam.

"He's good," Sam said. "But I haven't spoken to him for some time. You know how hard he can be to get a hold of."

"Not as hard as his nephew is," Liana said. "How long have you been in Tyken Town, and you didn't tell us?"

Sam appeared to wilt a little under Liana's hard look. "I've been keeping a bit of a low profile."

"Right," Liana said, still watching him. She turned to James and Evan. "I haven't heard from Sam in over five years, and a few hours ago he calls me saying he's nearby and coming to see us. Just like that."

James began to see Sam's life a little clearer now. He had been sent to look over James two years ago – no, Sam had *requested* the task, that's what he had said. And he had wanted to remain hidden in town while he posed as a colleague of James's. Sam was working with Den Keenosh in Tyken Town, along with their foreman, Tam. But why didn't the Oneron in this outpost know about it? Why would Sam keep his presence a secret from them? Did they know about Den?

"So, James Island," Liana said. "I've heard of your father, Hayden. My father speaks very highly of him." She glanced at Sam before continuing. "Sam has told me of your situation, and, you've come to the right place." She spread her arms out to point around her. "I hear we need to get you back to fighting fit."

"Something like that," James said, still uncomfortable with people knowing how ignorant and inexperienced he was. These people were seasoned soldiers with high ranks, and what was he? Someone who people said was once a soldier?

Liana leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. "I can only imagine how hard of a time you've had. You're in a safe place here. You can trust everyone in here. I promise you. But for you to believe my promise, you'll have to start by trusting me, I'm afraid."

James gave a weak smile. "I can do that. Is everyone here an Oneron?"

"Almost everyone," Liana said. "The most you'll find on this continent, anyway."

"Or on this planet," Sam added.

"And, the aliens here?" James asked, feeling like a kid in school. "Can any species be an Oneron?"

Liana nodded and gave him a small smile. "I see Sam has been filling in the blanks for you quite well. The Oneron race encompass several species. They all track back to several lineages, and so they are limited to which species can be an Oneron. Humanoids that are physiologically able to mate with one another, and so continuing the lineage and blood line."

"I see," James said, taking it all in. "And all the lineages can be tracked?"

"Some can still be," Liana said, "although it's hard to fully regress after so many centuries. Many books hold the original family lines and detail how they expanded."

James nodded and took a sip of his drink.

Liana turned to Evan. "And you are a friend of James's? Evan, was it?"

"Correct," Evan said. "I became acquainted with James in Tyken Town, also."

Acquainted, *James thought*. She asked if we were friends and he says acquainted.

"That's a long story to tell, too," Sam said, leaning over and putting his empty glass down. "Evan has been through a lot with us, and is just as interested in meeting Higero Jaxx as we are."

"Right, Jaxx," Liana said. "We have that intel on him you requested. Some is still coming. He's a difficult man to look into. But that'll have to wait until my father is finished with a few things; he wants to be there too when we make a plan."

Okay so Sam has pretty much told her everything, *James thought, trying to keep up*.

"We've confirmed the time Jaxx is expecting to meet Dr. Velome, and we few hours before we'll need you in Riondon," Liana said. She nodded to Evan. "I have someone who would like to meet you."

Evan looked up at her with a frozen expression. His raised eyebrows almost looked comical to James.

"Well," Liana said, "someone who would be interested in meeting you, and that sceptre of yours."

Evan remained silent.

"I've only dabbled with magic myself," Liana said, "but even I can feel the power coming from that thing. Melida has the most talents among us, and would definitely like to look at it. If that's okay with you, of course?"

Evan eventually nodded. "That would be fine."

"You'll like her, I promise," Liana said, smiling. She brought out a small device and typed into it.

"As for you, James," she said, focusing a moment longer on the device before lifting her gaze. "I have an idea for you, too."

It was James's turn to pause. "You have someone who wants to meet me, too?" he asked, feeling stupid.

Liana chuckled. "Yes. Me."

She stood as the door opened. One of the soldiers from earlier entered and stood at attention.

"Andeo, would you show our friend Evan here to Melly?"

"Sure thing," Andeo said. Despite his rigid posture, there was a casual air about him, and the way that Liana spoke to him. Maybe they weren't the strict, cold, and highly disciplined soldiers he had expected to find. A part of him relaxed at the thought, seeing them more as real people. People more like him. But he reminded himself that he wasn't like them. Not really.

Andeo gestured for Evan to follow him. Evan gave his companions a parting look, perhaps to check with them if it was okay for him to leave, although nothing was said between them. Maybe he was happy to be finally rid of them, James figured. Despite having apologised to each other, James couldn't help but still feel a coldness from Evan. Even if they were on good terms, he knew it would be a long while before they could be friends.

After they left, Liana stepped towards James. "I'm sure you're tired from your travels, but there's a place here I'd like to show you." She stood with her arms behind her back, and James couldn't help but marvel at her figure, though he tried not to look so obviously.

"Actually, that drink has done wonders," he said, realising how awake he felt. It really was impressive to discover how quickly he had become reinvigorated. Even his damaged side felt better. He wondered why people didn't drink that sagka all the time. "Where are we going?"

"Underground," Liana said. "We have a training chamber I'd like to show you."

Training. The word gave James pause. *No*, he told himself. *You should welcome training, not be afraid of it.* He stood, and Sam got to his feet also.

"I'll get reacquainted with Jorak," Sam said. "And will look out for Castan when he arrives, unless he's got himself lost."

James paused, having expected Sam to go with them.

"It's okay," Liana said. "I'll take good care of James. Help yourself to anything in the outpost, Sam. Anything you'd like to take." She eyed him as she turned away, to the point of looking back at him a moment.

Sam responded with a silent nod.

James followed Liana out of the room, wondering what the tension was he had just felt between them.