

Chapter Twenty Three: The Oneron Way - Part One

After riding for some time, with Castan making idle talk, they reached the top of a hill and finally saw Riondon in the distance. It was still far off, but James was relieved to see their destination after hours of travelling.

A dull-blue river cut through the rocky terrain and ran into a tight collection of buildings, which from this distanced looked like smudges of browns and creams. A few tall towers stretched above them all, mostly within the dense centre. Riondon looked to be about half the size of Tyken Town, James guessed, which was still very large for a town.

The winding river caught his attention. Having only known a life in Tyken Town, it occurred to him he had never seen water before, as far as he knew. Of course he was aware of rivers and lakes and oceans, but he had yet to actually see them in his two years of existence, apart from the odd fountain and pond.

Beyond Riondon, the horizon was smeared with dull greens and browns where the desert and rock began to recede. A long grey road wound its way into the town from the east: the main road they would have taken had they gone through the sand dunes.

"That's Riondon," Castan said triumphantly, fulfilling his tour guide duties.

"You were right," Sam said to him. "Much quicker than I would have taken." He turned his mousslo to trot along the top of the hill. "But we have a detour before we get to town."

"We're not going to Riondon?" James asked.

"Just a little stop outside of town," Sam said, not meeting his eyes.

"To where?"

"There's an Oneron Outpost I'd like to visit first."

James took a moment to take in this new information. "Someone there who's been messaging you?"

Sam nodded. "I messaged them. They're expecting us. Now."

"These Oneron can help us with Higerio Jaxx?" Evan asked, leading his mousslo beside Sam.

"They have the resources there to track him down. Jaxx is expecting his meeting with Dr. Velome sometime this afternoon.

"The one we'll be taking," James said. "Posing as metal miners, right?"

"We'll talk more at the outpost. Once we're out of this heat."

"All the same for me," Castan said cheerily. "My duty is not over until the three of you are in Riondon, however."

Sam grinned as he turned to the Canarrian. "You're welcome to accompany us, Castan."

"If you insist," Castan said. He shrugged as if it made no difference to him, but a cheeky smile crept on his face.

Why keep it a secret, James thought. Why not just tell us, tell me, that he was talking to other Oneron in a nearby outpost? He wondered why Sam was so quick to be secretive. The more James thought about it, the more it bothered him, to the point where he had to say something.

"Why wasn't going to this outpost a part of the plan already?"

"I didn't think it was necessary to involved them," Sam said, his eyes ahead. "I wanted to keep things small. Just us. And see what we find, without making things too complicated."

"And now?" James asked.

"Now, we have Red Guards looking for us. We're on Sacre's radar. And someone sent a space dragon to kill you specifically. And we lost any information we might have gathered in the warehouse in Tyken Town. We could do with more help and resources now."

James nodded dully, taking in the extent of their problems, the way Sam had listed them like that.

Castan asked for Sam to take the lead, which he did, taking them down an old dirt path that seemed to head back into the desert.

As they descended a hill, James noticed a small group of metal structures in the distance. He determined a few short buildings and a couple of towers, surrounded by the open rocky plains. That must be the outpost.

"Sam," James asked as a thought occurred. "Have you ever seen someone jump that far before? Like that priest did?"

Sam kept his focus ahead. "Never."

The single word troubled James, as did Sam's following silence.

"That priest, as you call him," Castan said. "The Super Oneron, as I call him. He may be neither. What I believe we saw, if you'd humour my simple sunburned mind, was a Red Monk. An actual, living, Enderokkou Monk." His eyes gleamed with excitement.

"The ones that died out thousands of years ago?" Sam asked.

"Well, yes, they're extinct. But that don't mean that one or two can't be running around still."

"Actually I think that's what extinct means," Sam said.

Castan went on, "The Red Monks had powers beyond all others, immeasurable to today's standards. And you saw his red coat."

Sam cocked his head in thought. "It's a nice idea, for sure. And who can say otherwise?"

After a half hour or so they came close to the outpost buildings. A glinting object approached them in the distance, trailing a cloud of dust. As it came closer, James saw it was a hoverbike, ridden by dark a figure.

Sam brought his mousslo to a stop and gestured for the others to do the same.

The hoverbike – long and sleek, unlike the blocky models James was used to seeing in Tyken Town – came to a stop several feet away. It slowly lowering to rest on the ground. It's rider had long dark hair tied back, and he wore a close-fitting blue uniform that showed a hard-muscled frame. A sword was strapped on his belt.

James noticed that Evan had casually unclipped the golden sceptre from his belt, but kept it where it was, so as not to draw attention to it.

"You folk lost? the man asked. He had a casual, unassuming air about him, and he spoke like a local Canarrian, despite clearly not looking like one.

"Captain Khallo is expecting us," Sam said.

The man's expression hardened. Without showing any change, he at once appeared to be a different person, the local persona giving way to a disciplined soldier. It reminded James of when he would see Sam shift from a construction worker colleague to a hardened war hero. "Sam Hawkings," the soldier said, his voice stiff. "I am Corporal Aris Deldantion. We have been expecting you. Although not with company."

"Nonetheless, I'm here," Sam said. "Are my friends and I permitted to enter the outpost?"

The man, Aris, nodded sharply. "Of course, General. You are welcomed to stable your animals in the docking station; the small building beside the southern tower. Someone will be there to take you to Captain Khallo."

Sam nodded back. "You have our thanks."

Aris remained a moment longer, and James felt that there was something unspoken between him and Sam. The soldier cast a look over the mousslo's, perhaps wondering why they hadn't arrived in a ship.

"I will inform the Captain of your arrival," Aris said, initiating his hovercraft's engine and lifting it a couple feet from the ground. He turned the bike and headed back to the cluster of buildings, trailing another cloud of dust behind him.

Captain Khallo, James thought as the bike's thrumming engines faded away. *Corporal. General. Those buildings will be filled with Oneron soldiers.* People like James was meant to be. What would they think of him, coming to them as one of their own, but knowing nothing about them?

It was all so sudden. James hadn't expected to meet any more Oneron any time soon, and now he was going into a place filled with them. He mentally prepared himself as they approached the Oneron Outpost.

They were greeted by another soldier in blue and led farther into the compound. Castan told them he would stay back and be sure the mousslos would be looked after, as he was troubled by the lack of feed and comfortable conditions in the stark docking station.

No longer needing their desert cloaks, they removed them and handed them to a young man in the stables, who promised to take care of them. Sam insisted he could keep them in the outpost. James felt a little uncomfortable with the dried blood showing on his side, but he couldn't help that now. Atleast the time in the desert had helped him recover somewhat.

They stepped through the inner door into a long room with cool air. A small creature was nestled on a cushioned mat in the corner by the door. James recognised it as a tejan cub, the desert tigers that were native to Carnan. Although he had never seen one as a pet before.

"It is a pleasure, General," the stocky man said to Sam as he led them down a grey corridor. Prosgo, he said his name was.

"You are kind, Corporal," Sam said. "How are affairs here in the outpost?"

"Quiet, as of late," Prosgo said. "Some chatter here and there. We have men in the east, assessing a land dispute that has grown ugly. But, quiet mostly."

"You make a habit of interfering with local disputes?" Sam asked as they rounded a corner and came to another passageway.

"We allow the Canarrian authorities to do their jobs. As you know, we do not like to make our presence known if we can. However, the dispute in the east concerns an unclaimed piece of land, which the authorities care little for and they have not intervened."

James regarded their guide. Prosgo's powerful muscles stretched his blue uniform, which James could now see had a tightly layered, criss-crossed weaving. It looked both thick and

breathable. A thick belt matched his black boots. Despite his beefy size, Prosgo carried himself lightly, shoulders back and rigid. *Years of training and discipline*, James thought. *Was that all in the mind, though? If someone forgot their training, would their walk become different? Would their countenance change so much? How much would the body remember, if the mind forgets?* James realised he had pushed his own shoulders back a little, walking a little straighter.

Evan remained quiet beside James. The Voarn's eye moved constantly, taking in their new surroundings.

"Just through here," Prosgo said as they came to large double doors. He typed in a keypad on the wall and a locking mechanism shifted within the thick doors. James noticed the grapple hook clipped to Prosgo's belt, and looked down at the one he carried himself. It was strange to see a similarity between this Oneron soldier and himself.

Prosgo led them through to a large open room, thrumming with the low hum of machinery. Monitors and consoles lined most of the curved walls. Several men in uniforms sat by the consoles along the walls. A large mech unit was attached to the ceiling, running along a track that ran around the room. Several of its long arms jabbed at buttons on the consoles, while others reached to nearby stations and worked on them. A higher platform was in the centre, accessed by a staircase on either side, and held a panel of computers and a large holo-screen. A wide table lay in the middle of the platform, where a large man stood.

A grey-skinned man with a ridged, bulbous head stood over a console beside them, speaking with another soldier. James stared at the alien and wondered if he was also an Oneron. He had never considered that other aliens could be Oneron too, and made a note to ask Sam about it later.

"Ah, there he is," said the burly man on the higher platform. His voice was deep and booming. He wore a white military jacket over a grey shirt and trousers. A heavy black beard lined his wide face. "General Hawkings, it has been too long."

"It's good to see you, General Khallo," Sam said as they ascended the short steps up the platform.

General Khallo? *James thought.* Didn't Sam say Captain Khallo, earlier?

The general shook Sam's hand.

"This must be James Island," General Khallo said, his dark eyes searching James. When they shook hands, James was surprised by the General's firm grip.

James nodded to the big man, unsure of what to say.

"And this is our friend, Evan Goodheart," Sam said, gesturing to Evan.

The general nodded and shook Evan's hand. Compared to his huge size, Evan seemed like a small child, coming up to the General's abdomen. "You are welcomed, Voarn friend."

"Thank you for having us, General," Evan said.

"This is Jorak Khallo," Sam said to his companions. "An old friend of my father's, and in charge of this outpost."

"Not my outpost," Jorak said with a crooked smile. "I just pay the bills. Liana is the one you want."

"Is she around?" Sam asked.

"Closer than you think," said a female voice.

James turned to see a woman who had entered from the other side of the room, accompanied by two men in uniform. He was struck immediately by the woman's startling beauty. Her dark eyes watched them as she approached, her long, sleek raven hair bouncing with her strides. She wore a dark suit that hugged her slim, curvy frame, with longboots that thudded softly on the metal floor.

"Liana," Sam said, smiling.

"It's been too long, Sam," she said as she came up the metal steps.

"Your father said the same thing," Sam said. He held his arms out and they embraced.

James caught the scent of her perfume as she held Sam. The two soldiers beside her also had grapple hooks on their belts, although neither Liana nor Jorak had one. It made James realise how strange it was for Sam not to have one either. A grapple hook was meant to be the symbol of the Oneron, and all soldiers carried one. So why didn't Sam have one?

"And who are your friends?" Liana asked. Her gaze caused James's heart to shudder, and he suddenly became aware of how out of place he was around these people who seemed so familiar with each other.

"James Island, and Evan Goodheart," Sam said, gesturing to them both. "Our fourth companion is a local Canarrian, tending to our mousslos in your docking station."

Liana nodded to them with a small smile. "Mousslos?" she asked. "From Tyken Town? You must be exhausted."

"From Toolin," Sam corrected her.

"Never one to make it easy on himself, is Sam," Jorak said, narrowing his eyes at Sam.

Liana had already turned to the soldier on her left. "Andeo, could you bring our companions some sagka?"

The man nodded and went down the steps towards the far door. The other soldier remained at her side, standing quietly. The rigid discipline of the soldiers were quite intimidating, James felt.

Sam hummed softly. "That sounds wonderful."

Liana smiled, her eyes thinning in a manner that seemed alluring to James. The deep blue-black of her eyes were startling, and he found himself staring into them. "Come," she said. "We have a lot to discuss and you must be weary from your travels."

Jorak clapped Sam on the shoulder. "You kids go on ahead, I have some things to finish here."

Sam nodded and shook the man's hand again. "Thank you, General."

"Merl," Liana said to the soldier beside her. "Give my father a hand, here, would you? You know how lonely he gets. I'll see to our guests."

The soldier gave a sharp nod.

"Fine," Jorak grumbled, shaking his head as they left him. He turned to the soldier. "Here, hand me those folders there."

Liana led them to the far door, which opened to a short corridor with two doors on either side. She opened the first door on the right and waved them in.