

Chapter Eleven: Tabetha's Aunt's House

A rumbling engine carried in the wind, rising for a moment before they saw spacecraft fly over them. James saw it was a local transport ship, likely taking people to Tyken Town, judging by its trajectory. He studied the darkening sky over the street. A dull smudge of light showed the sun behind a heavy cloud formation moving from the east. "The day's getting," he said to no one in particular. "It's long past the noon bell already."

"Aye," Sam said, "we were in those caves earlier for longer than we thought."

As they walked through a quiet dirt path that led back to the main road, James watched Evan from the corner of his eye, regarding the golden sceptre he now carried. Having seen the destructive power that Audlin had conjured with it, James wasn't sure how good of an idea it was that they had kept the sceptre with them. But it was better than leaving it in the street.

Outside of a shop on the corner ahead, James noticed two men speaking. One was a very rotund alien with long arms that reached the ground, and the other was a maroon-skinned Canarrian man that seemed vaguely familiar. It was a rare occurrence for James to be familiar with something, especially out in Toolin, and so he took note of the moment. The Canarrian man stood nervously, pulling at his jumper and speaking in hushed, agitated tones. Then James recognised him from the tavern. The curly haired man had been arguing with the bartender earlier and still seemed on edge. The large alien appeared to disagree with him as much as the bartender had done, shaking his head and frowning. James tried to overhear them out of curiosity as he passed, but couldn't make out their words.

"So," James said, looking sideways at Sam. "Who is this Tabetha? How do you know her?"

Sam said, "I met her shortly after I came to Tyken Town to look over you. We got talking one day at her flower stall, and I found out that her uncle was an administrator in the Daeyan Local army, while I served there. Although I had never met him myself. I continued to visit her every now and then, and we became friends."

"I would have thought you'd known each other for a lot longer, from the way she is with you," James said, hinting at the real question he wanted to ask.

Sam shrugged. "She's an affectionate lass." He must have seen the thoughtful look on James's face, and added, "We've never been more than friends, though. Well, apart from one night. But we've only ever really been friends."

James nodded. "She does seem like a great girl."

"Oh aye, she is," Sam said.

"She lives with her parents?" James asked.

"They died several years ago." Sam's face remained neutral, but there was a tension in his eyes. James was learning to look closer at Sam's subtle expression shifts. "She grew up in Victory City, where her father was a government official. After her parent's airship accident, Tabs was raised by her mother's sister, Hettie, and brought here to her house in Toolin."

James sighed deeply. "That's rough." After some thought, he added, "She has no other family to help her?"

"All that remain on Carnan are mostly in northern Medropon, past Victory City. But they rarely visit these parts."

James had always thought that the Canarrians were close with their families, and had to wonder why Tabetha's family sounded so estranged.

Sam led them down a side alley to cut across to the next main street.

James stretched his shoulder and felt a bruise on his side. He shook his head and cursed himself internally. If he hadn't suggested sword training then they wouldn't have given Audlin an opportunity to attack them. Evan was put in danger because James had wanted to challenge himself. What was he thinking, anyway? He wasn't a real soldier.

There was also that tense moment of Evan slamming Sam into the ground. James eyed them both without trying to be obvious. He noted that they hadn't spoken to each other since they'd left the docking station.

A series of rhythmic taps drew his attention. An old man in rags sat against a rusted aircraft on the side of the road. Both man and craft were little more than skeletons, although the old man – heavily wrinkled eyes and a large smile that revealed missing teeth – appeared full of life still. Wooden sticks of varying length and thickness were attached to his fingers, and he was tapping them on a metal sheet on the ground, causing the musical taps. A bucket lay beside him with a sign written in Canarrian, and a few coins had been dropped in.

James's stomach twisted at the sight of the homeless man. He reminded him of the beggar James had killed a few days earlier. He told himself it was self-defence, and if he could, he would take it all back. He just wished he knew how that man had recognised him, when no one in Tyken Town was meant to know who he was.

The thought of being recognised reminded him of The Dark Sorcerer, the evil being that was meant to be searching for him. Why an evil being was searching the galaxy for him, James still couldn't say. He had a lot of questions for Den Keenosh, if he ever saw him again. In a way, he knew it was for the best that there was a spell over Tyken Town, to help keep him hidden, if there had been dangerous entities looking for him.

The beggar's musical tapping intensified and took on an impressive rhythm as they neared. James dropped several coins into a bucket beside the man, barely able to look at him.

Farther up the main road they returned to the market area and made their way to the flower stall owned by Sam's friend.

The Canarrian girl, Tabetha, was speaking with a tall, red-skinned man as they approached. Most of the flowers on display were gone, except for a few smaller pots and some wilted blossoms. Petals and leaves were scattered along the stall unit and around the ground.

Saying something to her in Canarrian, the tall man gave her a one-armed hug and left carrying a tray of plant pots. She fired off a rapid stream of Canarrian as she waved goodbye.

Tabetha's eyes lit up when she caught sight of them nearing, and her toothy smile broadened even more.

She ran to them and tackled Sam with a big hug that lifted her off her feet. "Oh it's so good to see you, Sam," she said, her brows squeezing with sincerity.

When they pulled back, she spoke to Sam in Canarrian and looked expectantly between James and Evan. The moment her large brown eyes locked onto James caused his heart to flutter.

"I'm so happy you come for dinner," she said, her accent distorting the words only slightly. "I will need to finish here and then I am ready." She ran back to her stall and started wiping the discarded petals from the counter into her hand.

"If you... see something you like," Tabetha said, finding her words and waving a hand over the stall, "feel free to help yourself. My pleasure for you to have."

Sam collected a broom from behind the counter and began sweeping the fallen leaves and petals into a pile.

"No, Sam, any *flowers*." Tabetha scolded him with a big smirk. "I do this."

"Not a problem," Sam told her.

"Can I do anything to help?" James asked, seeing that it was the right thing to do.

"No, no, I am fine."

Sam nodded to the side of the stall. "Fetch a bag for these leaves, would you?"

Ignoring Tabetha's angry glare, and the pouty frown she gave them both, James helped Sam clear the stall. When Evan also lent a hand, clearing some of the petals into a bag, James noted that he kept a grip on the golden sceptre at all times.

After they were finished, Tabetha gave them another broad smile. "Such nice boys," she said, her heavy eyelids lowering with sincerity.

She pulled on a thin cardigan and strung a small bag over her shoulder, then led them down the main road. Walking ahead with Sam, she spoke constantly, switching between Canarrian and Standard. Sam seemed happy enough to let her speak, even though he had little chance to respond. At one point she asked if they had heard the thunder earlier, and they exchanged looks as they realised she must have been speaking of the tornado Evan had summoned.

James found himself imagining being the one to walk beside her and hear her stories. He absently wondered how close her friendship really was with Sam. Tabetha seemed like the kind of person that would be friendly to everyone. She had a lot of energy, that was for sure. When he noticed himself following the sway of her hips, and the curve of her waist, he forced himself to look away.

A pang of loneliness twisted in his chest. There had been so much going on in the two years of his existence, so much anxiety filling his mind, that he had not thought much about women. How could he ask someone to get to know him and care for him, when even he didn't know who he was? Within the past few seasons, he had gotten to know a tavern matron, Annabel, quite well, but she always seemed a bit distant with him. He knew now that it was due to the spell over the town, that made him easily forgettable by those he interacted with. Although, maybe it was because she just wasn't that interested in him. His sigh was audible as he walked behind Sam and Tabetha, Evan beside him.

Tabetha turned them up an inclining pathway on the side of the roundabout. The houses along the higher ground were distinctly hexagonal in design, with small windows on each side of the one-level buildings. Some of the houses were connected together by two sides touching, and farther down the pathway James could see three buildings joined together, with two sides touching like giant puzzle pieces. He remembered some of the older houses in the Far Field borough near his Tyken Town home had a similar design, but were all separated and much larger than the connected buildings of Toolin.

Up a grassy path, they came to an individual building on the edge of a sheer rock wall that overlooked the main road. Patches of mud and red weeds gave the area a musky, pungent odour, although thankfully the wind was stronger on the higher ground.

"Is Hettie home?" Sam asked as they approached the front door.

"These days she stays home a lot," Tabetha said, pulling her cardigan tighter.

She swiped a card on a panel next to the door frame, and then typed into a keypad. Pushing the door open, she invited them in.

The hot air of the tiled corridor smothered Evan as he followed them in. Photo frames on the plastered walls showed several people in different environments. He noted the younger versions of Tabetha, who seemed to have found her large, toothy smile from a young age.

He guessed that the man and woman in the photos were her parents, although they only appeared in a few of the frames.

Beyond the hallway they came to a carpeted room, occupied with a sofa beside two armchairs, and a cloth-covered table in the centre. Cabinets and shelves lined the walls along with side tables, giving little room to walk around.

A wide arch at the far end of the room gave way to what appeared to be a small kitchen area. There an old lady stood over a stove, tending to a pot. A loose scarf was draped over her crooked form, over a long pink gown that reached the tiled kitchen floor. Tight curls of white hair bobbed with her tilting head, moving with the rhythm of slow music playing from an old device on the counter, while the rest of her remained still.

"Meia," Tabetha called soothingly. She entered the kitchen and took the ladle from the old lady.

Evan watched them, slowly making his way around the table towards the kitchen. His stomach tightened when an old memory returned to him. A memory he had been trying to suppress ever since he'd met Tabetha. But Reisa's heavy-lidded eyes came to him once again, warming his heart in a way that only she could.

When the old woman acknowledged Tabetha, her down-turned eyes widened and her wrinkled mouth tightened, stretching her gaunt features.

The old woman's eyes narrowed when she saw Sam approach. Evan determined that Tabetha was introducing Sam to her. He had assumed that Sam and Tabetha's aunt would have met before-something inside him said so-but he must have been wrong. The old woman frowned and shook her head.

Tabetha turned the music device off and laid a hand on her aunt's shoulder, looking at them all. "This is my meia, Hethenae. Hettie."

James raised a hand. "Nice to meet you." He then added, "Lis sano bousai ed."

Evan simply nodded, feeling that the old woman did not understand anything they said. Something caught his eye over the woman's head, and he stepped closer, focussing. This time he saw the glint in the air, beside her ear. A black shimmer caught the light from some angles. Evan had learned that the black signified a void of emotions, usually found on the deranged and ill-willed, although the faint, grey mist over the black told him there was a great uncertainty with the old woman. Now concentrating on the aura that was revealing itself, he saw the black was shattered, the fragmented pieces glimmering like black opal stones. It was an aura that he had never seen before.

Tabetha sighed and said, "She is... not used to strangers. But she is happy to have you."

"What ails her?" Evan asked. He had to know what a shattered aura meant.

Tabetha's smile remained while her eyelids lowered with sadness. "Her mind is troubled. A deg..." She looked to Sam.

"Degenerative," he offered.

"Degenerative... disorder," she went on. "Mesthria, is called. She has trouble remembering, sometimes. The last few years are been the worse."

Evan considered this. Memory problems. Like James, perhaps? Although James had never shown a shattered aura. The fracturing could be a sign of this woman's particular illness. He couldn't help but take an interest whenever he came across a new mixture of colours and shapes that made up a person's mind, even if he tried to deny his gift existed.

Feeling an overwhelming urge, Evan stepped closer, moving slow and deliberately. He placed the sceptre carefully on the sofa and then took Hettie's frail hand. The wrinkled skin on her bony fingers was soft and loose, reminding him of his mother's hands in her later years. He placed his other hand on top of Hettie's. Closing his eyes, he channelled the gods.

He heard Tabetha's voice, lowered with confusion. "What is he...?"

"He's strange like that," James said simply.

There was more talk, but Evan dismissed them all.

Inside his mind, a shimmer in the void told him a god was watching. A familiar presence took his breath away. Andaano. The goddess was watching over the old woman. Favouring her from so far away. Evan smiled broadly, rejoicing in the overwhelming sense of warmth that bathed him. He hadn't expected to pinpoint a godly source so soon. There must have been a strong energy in this place.

A thrumming vibration brought Evan out of the connection, and he released the woman's hand. "She is a brave woman," he said to Tabetha, his voice a whisper. Clearing his throat, he added, "The gods look on her favourably." He looked away as he collected the sceptre from the sofa.

Tabetha hesitated, before saying, "Thank you for your words."

Evan nodded, still looking away. As usual, channelling the godly realms had brought him into a melancholic and troubled mood. The solemn feeling reminded him of Reisa. Reminded him of how he used to feel around her. Like he had tapped into the meaning of existence.

"That reminds me, Tabs," Sam said, moving to Evan's side. "We have a gift for you." He gestured to the sceptre in Evan's hand.

Tabetha's smile dropped as her eyes fell on the golden sceptre. She eyes darted to Sam. "Where did you get this?"

"In the possession of a local hunter. A full lamakh. I figured that it might be in better hands with you. Maybe you could even sell it. You know people in the Victory City High Markets still?"

Tabetha shook her head with a grave look. "No, no, Sam. I will not touch it. There's something wrong there. Can't you feel it?" Her breath was sharp.

Evan exchanged a look with Sam, but it was clear that neither of them knew what she meant.

Sam went on. "He said he found it with the remains of a Tol Sehjaavi demon."

Tabetha was grimacing, as if struck with a sudden headache. "I do not believe that to be correct."

Evan lowered the sceptre. "Do you know its origin?" he asked.

It took her several seconds to answer. "No. Just a feeling. Maybe an old Canarrian trick. But is not a sensation I can live with." She turned to Sam. "Sorry, Sam, I really am. But I can't keep that thing here."

Sam nodded. "I understand. It was just a thought. We'll keep it with us."

"Throwing it into the Infinite Abyss is better," Tabetha muttered.

Evan studied the sceptre in his hands. The rubies lining the wide, curved top still managed to gleam in the low light, as did the large emerald embedded in the tip. He was surprised that he couldn't detect any power radiating from it.

The pot on the stove started boiling and whistling. Tabetha rushed into the kitchen and lowered the heat. "She was making tea," she explained to them over her shoulder, her voice becoming more casual. "I usually return at this time and she used to always make tea for us. Sometimes she still remembers that. I will make more for you three."

"That would be great," Sam said. He took Hettie gently by the elbow, saying something softly in Canarrian.

The old woman looked up at him, and a form of coherence formed in her eyes. She smiled and allowed Sam to move her to one of the armchairs.

Tabetha looked back over her shoulder. The light from the kitchen window cast her face half in light and half in dim shadows. Her heavy lids were lowered to cover most of her dark pupils.

Watching her, Evan's stomach tightened. Tabetha's eyes were so much like Reisa's... Her broad, toothy smiles also reminded him of his old friend.

He turned away, no longer paying attention to the other people in the room, and looked over the cloth-draped shelves and glass cabinets. A metal fan thrummed on the low ceiling, though he wished that a window would open to ease the stifling air in the room.

His eyes fell on a framed photo on a shelf. The image depicted a beach on a sunny day, green water lapping onto a shore of deep-red sand. His breath caught. He had not expected to see another reminder of Reisa so suddenly.

He could no longer deny the signs given to him. A deep longing, filled with regret, enveloped Evan, sending him into his thoughts. To a day more than forty years ago.