

Chapter Three: Confrontations - Part One

Blurry light formed within the darkness. Cloudy, indistinct shapes gave way to a scene that Evan Goodheart did not recognise.

A warped wooden table was in front of him, next to a large, gold-rimmed chest. A stubby candle lit the area with a dull, flickering light, keeping most of the area in darkness. The cobwebbed rock walls were pitted and pocked with shadows. It took Evan a hazy moment to recall that he was in a cave.

He tried to move his numb arms, but they were restrained. He forced himself to fight through his weariness and to focus. He was up against a rocky pillar, hands over his head and tied by a thick frayed rope that was scratching his wrists.

A moment of fear arose as he struggled against the restraints, feeling helpless and vulnerable. A sharp pain came to his head, and he recalled being struck in the temple. A shadow had come alive and attacked him. His left eye stung and felt puffy, and his skin felt tight on the side of his face—dried blood, he guessed.

How had he got himself in this situation?

Evan's memory came back to him in a jumble of images. He had been with James Island and Sam Hawkings, taking refuge from an approaching sandstorm. They had eaten and spoken a little, and Evan remembered the sounds of the crackling fire as sleep eventually took him.

There was something else, also.

Rolling fields in the sunshine, a bright cream sky, a warm homely sensation. No... a sound. A cry in the darkness. That was it.

A call had carried through the cave and awoken him. The echoes of a stuttering roar rang through Evan's mind. An echo from the past. He would never forget that sound, the cry of the great Hogg Beast.

When Evan's parents had been taken prisoner by their invading forces, it was a Hogg Beast that had guarded his parents' cage. The giant creature, a tusked bear-creature the size of a tall building, roared back at Evan through the years.

That same cry had come from deep within the tunnels. At the time, Evan was sure it was the same beast. Now though, he didn't know what to believe. Was it possible for the beast to be on this planet also, far away from Evan's homeworld?

He could not see his sword anywhere. The fear of losing it again quickened his heart, but he told himself to be sure-minded and optimistic. *Whoever or whatever had imprisoned him would have the sword nearby somewhere. He would retrieve it once free.* The sword would do him no good with his hands tied, anyway.

He searched the candle-lit area in an attempt to find a way to free himself. Empty glass vials littered the table in front of him, along with several dull coins and an ancient-looking flaky scroll. What appeared to be charred bone fragments were scattered over the yellow pages of a book.

Thick spider webbing by the table legs brought to mind the hut of Elder Cenasure. After Evan's homeland had been taken, his people had sought refuge among a neighbouring tribe. The old elapor had performed the ritual that sent Evan on his spiritual trials—which had begun his journey to find James Island—on a warped table like this one. Cenasure had used finger-bones as part of the ritual. Strange that Evan would see such items here, as if someone had conducted a similar ritual in these caves.

Flashes of him falling through a vortex of red mist, sunbursts flaring all around, came back to Evan. His transportation across the galaxy remained a vivid memory. Why he had been sent to meet James Island, only the gods and their infinite wisdom could say.

He struggled against his restraints again but only served to tighten the rope against his sore wrists.

A defeated, solemn whimper left his lips. Evan longed to be back with his parents. Back to a simpler time, when they lived in peace. His intense yearning for the past caused his stinging temple to throb and weariness took over him.

His parents had been with him recently, he could feel it. He could smell his mother's fragrance. How that was possible, he could not say.

Moonlight guide you, Evan-ol. His mother's voice whispered in his mind.

No, he had *seen* them recently. In the fields outside the castle, when he and Reisa had caught the spira spark. Did he really catch the spira with her? Or was that a dream? No, it had been real. He and Reisa had been named guardians of the Sansa'laa. They were fated to be together. But that was all so long ago. Memories and visions drifted into one, and Evan struggled to keep his grasp on reality.

A familiar presence was beside him. Within him. A dark shadow. The thrumming energy that accompanied its existence shook Evan's bones. *Be gone, foul creature. I deny you.* Evan repeated the thought, stronger this time. *By the Valour of Andaano the First, I deny you!*

Where had he heard those words before? From the Elder Cenasure? From a god?

The vibrating force lingered a moment before it left his mind, leaving an exhausted clarity. The tension in his head cleared. Whatever that thing was that crept into his mind on occasions, Evan wanted no part of it.

He steadied his breaths and looked around again for a means of escape.

He considered conjuring something to help him. A wind would do no good here. Perhaps some of his Earth sorcery knowledge could help him. If he grabbed a hold of the rocky pillar, he could gain control of it and possibly break it apart. He had seen his father do something similar before. He just had to concentrate enough. But in his pained and restricted state, it would be hard to focus enough to channel his sorcery correctly.

Evan closed his eyes and slowed his breathing, preparing for a feat he had never before attempted. He searched within himself for the point of light his father had taught him to find—the inner spark that was the source of his being—careful not to delve astray and disturb anything else within him.

The void of his mind spread out before him.

A sharp flash cut through the void, shocking Evan. His throat caught and he sputtered and coughed, gasping for breath. He cursed and willed himself to fight past the weariness of his body.

Stifling a few lingering coughs, Evan thought he heard something else in the room. He held his breath to stop any further coughs and listened. Silence engulfed the room, his keen ears picking out the flickering candle, and scratching behind the wall ahead of him, likely a small rodent. Adjusting to the silence, he also determined the softly clacking pincers of a bug.

He kept his head still, but saw everything in his field of vision.

Dirt shifted from behind. Something was in the cave with him.

The disturbed earth told him something large was being dragged. It moved towards him with a stream of hisses and rattles. A scaly column suddenly curled around the pillar and a massive, bulbous head turned to him. Large green orbs flashed, a long tongue flickering through a wide mouth filled with tiny sharp teeth.

Evan froze at the sight of the large serpent.

A low whine came from beyond the tunnel. Somewhere below them. It was followed by a deep rumble that shook loose chips of rock and dust from above. The whine reminded James of old metal frameworks creaking, a sound he had last heard on a construction site that felt a world away, and a lifetime ago.

"What is that?" he asked Sam.

"My guess would be the Old Tracks. The abandoned tunnel system that runs under Medropon. An old method of transport."

"The carriages that hung beneath rail tracks. I've read about them."

James shivered, despite the warm air. The rocky ceiling had begun to feel too low for his comfort. He had lost track of his bearings a while ago, but had the distinct impression the tunnels had been descending for some time.

He rubbed under the metal armbands on his forearms, wiping the building sweat. He could have removed the thoughtlets, as he wasn't likely to get back to work any time soon, but somehow not wearing them just didn't feel right. Sam still wore his red sleeveless Rimas Complete jacket. His shirt underneath was muddied and stained and looked more brown than it's original white.

They now stepped on large slabs of cracked rock, which meant there were no more footprints or markings in the dirt to follow. They continued to walk in silence for some time.

A strong howl ripped through the air, echoing down the tunnel behind them. The wail reverberated off the walls and receded into a low echo that rang in James's ears.

They both stopped, encompassed by a silence that only the crackling flames broke. When the sounds faded away, James was afraid to ask what they were hearing. He had never heard the wails of the grillocks before—the inhabitants of these caves—but he had read of them, and the way they would call to each other.

Once it was clear there was nothing else to be heard, Sam was the first to continue walking, and James followed.

James thought of all the places he would have preferred to be right then. Up on the cliff edge of Mount Volton, watching the city of Tyken Town below. Or reading in Medro Park, surrounded by the fragrant grass and trees with the sun shining.

It had been a simple life. One that he still hadn't fully come to love, if he were honest. But he had been comfortable. And yet, there was something that troubled him. Something he couldn't quite place.

He was starting to see his life in Tyken Town in a whole new light.