

Chapter Six - The Carnan Sand Dunes - Part One

Farther away from the caves, Evan helped James lay Sam's unconscious body on the sandy ground. James dropped to his knees and checked on the Oneron soldier, while Evan caught his breath. The bright daylight did little to ease his tension and adrenaline, images of the large shadow beasts flashing through his mind. Evan told himself they were safe now, out in the open. He just hoped it were true.

Sam's chest moved slightly, showing weak signs of life, his eyes remaining closed. The bleeding from the long gashes in his shoulder had mostly stopped, though a pool had gathered under him, seeping into the cracked earth.

"Sam," James said, a hand on Sam's chest. "Sam, can you hear me?"

Moaning softly, Sam's head slowly moved.

Relief washed over Evan as Sam opened his eyes, blinking back the bright daylight.

"I'm... I'm fine," Sam said weakly. He attempted to rise, though James held him down gently.

"Wait, Sam," James said. "Just take a minute. You passed out."

Evan stepped back and studied the surrounding sand dunes. They stood on a rocky ledge overlooking the rolling hills, low mountains stretching in the far distance. The sun was blurred behind a curtain of red dust that spread along the horizon, the aftermath of the storm that had ravaged the land overnight. Evan let the weak sun sooth him, calming his own breath.

When James glanced back towards the caves and shivered, Evan saw the look of fear and uncertainty in his pained expression. Evan shook his head at the weakness James displayed. Their saviour had admittedly handled himself well in the caves, jumping on that serpent, although Evan could still see the doubts and inabilities of their soft hero. He could see it better than most.

Sam had acted stronger; at least he appeared to be a competent fighter. That wall of fire he had conjured was an impressively powerful act of sorcery, especially given his fatigue and injury.

Evan sighed with weariness. He should help Sam. Although in the moment he could hardly stand himself. "Let me see him," he said. "Sorcery should not be attempted with a weary mind. However I can ease his pain for now."

Evan went to his knees beside Sam. James watched him eagerly, and also with a sense of uncertainty.

Evan held a hand over Sam's injured shoulder, inches from the wounds. He managed to focus enough to channel his healing arts within his hand, feeling the energy flow through him, and pressed his hand firmly onto Sam. A burst of green light expanded from the contact, dissipating in the air in wispy tendrils. Sam's cried out, his back arching up, and then he dropped and became silent.

"Give him a moment," Evan said. He lay down on the ground, beside Sam, and caught his breath. He felt as though he had been running non-stop for an entire day.

It wasn't until Evan opened his eyes that he realised he had fallen asleep. Possibly passed out. James stood nearby, surveying the landscape. Sam was asleep beside Evan.

Evan rose onto an elbow. "How long...?"

James came to him. "Just a few minutes. Are you okay?"

Evan nodded and felt his head throb. "We must leave here. We cannot linger."

A weak groan came from Sam. He slowly lifted his head and turned onto his good shoulder, wincing. "Evan's... right. We should go."

"Sam," James said. "Can you walk? You look half-dead."

Sam attempted to stand, before James helped him the rest of the way. Evan rose to his feet also, stumbling and fighting the dizziness in his head. James lay a hand on Evan's elbow, helping steady him.

Evan met eyes with James. He had a fearful look, and a guarded air. James was scared of him. Evan could tell. He nodded his thanks to James.

Faint howls and barks came from the cave mouth behind them. The glowing light of the flames within still wavered and told them they were safe for now.

"The fire will soon die," Sam said. "The grillocks are not accustomed to the light, though nor are they afraid of it."

"I won't object to leaving," James said. He moved to help Sam but was met with a raised hand.

"I should be fine on my own. Thank you," Sam told him. Evan detected the pride colouring his voice.

They collected their things and made their way down the large steps of the declining rocks.

James winced when he checked the lines of scratches on his own bloodied shoulder, His wounds were far less severe than Sam's, however. As if they were a poor imitation.

Evan felt his strength returning alongside the rising heat of the sun. His legs were still weak although his mind was somewhat clearing. He stretched an ache from his neck. It had been a long day, with a long night, and he would welcome a good sleep the first chance he had.

When they reached the coarse sand at the foot of the rocks, Sam faltered and dropped to the ground.

James ran to his side.

The colour had drained from Sam's face and his eyes were sunken bruises. "Just a dizzy spell." Sam swallowed and steadied his breathing. He leaned against a rock, his face glistening with sweat. "I guess I'm out of practice." He gave a wry smile, though his eyes were still tense. "It's been a while since I channelled a magic like that. Must have pushed myself harder than I thought."

"Conjuring sorcery can take its toll on the body," Evan told them, recalling his lessons. "It is a physical strain as well as a mental ability. And requires its constant practice, like any other art. I must admit, that fire was very impressive. I do not even know if I could have conjured such power, with your injuries."

Sam nodded, still attempting to steady his breath, and fell silent.

Evan's stomach tightened when he saw brief flashes of colour wash over James's head. James had just delved into his thoughts, and, now that he had the opportunity to see them, Evan couldn't help but look closer. Splashes of blue and yellow wavered over James, like undulating ink stains. Somewhere in the colours, Evan saw—and felt—James's torture. Somehow he felt guilty for Sam's injuries. Why he would, Evan could not tell yet. An image wavered through the coloured air. One that didn't make sense at all. Evan thought he had also sensed a great dragon, along with a jagged mountain range.

James looked back at the way they had come. "So, Sam. While we rest a bit more. Are we far enough away now that we can talk about what happened in there?"

Evan confirmed his suspicions, seeing the connection with James's thoughts and his words.

Sam gave a weak shrug. "I have a few theories. But really, I don't think anyone can really explain what we came across."

"You had an adventure without me?" Evan asked, attempting to hide all knowledge of their activity.

"You could say as much," Sam said. "But not a very fun one. It appears that we stumbled upon a spirit of an ancient dragon. The kind that was thought to have roamed the land before people inhabited this planet. Or so the history books say. It felt as though we had entered its thoughts—its dreams—that we had somehow disturbed its slumber."

"How does that make any sense?" James asked, clearly baffled.

Another shrug from Sam. "I felt something in there. Something I haven't felt often. The presence of a highly potent Dark Magic. Either it was in the cave with us, or in the dream we saw. Or both. But it had a part to play somewhere, I suspect."

A coloured splash over Sam's head told Evan that he had more to say, although the soldier kept quiet, as he usually did.

"Dark Magic," James said thoughtfully, and shuddered. "Well, whatever it was, I'm glad we made it out of there."

Over James's head splashed a faint image of a hooded figure, shrouded in darkness. A sharp pain immediately struck inside Evan's mind, and he gasped. The hooded figure remained burned in his eyes for a few seconds before he managed to blink it away. Evan wasn't sure, but he felt he knew what it was. James had been told that there was a dangerous being searching for him, known as the Dark Sorcerer. He claimed to have had a vision of the evil being, shortly after he had been recognised by a beggar in Tyken Town days earlier. Den Keenosh said the Dark Sorcerer was looking for James, although did not say why exactly. Now, the mention of Dark Magic must have reminded James of the Dark Sorcerer. Perhaps, Evan wondered, the power from inside the caves was somewhat connected to the power of the Dark Sorcerer's magic. In his tired state, Evan didn't care to prod further.

Instead, Evan assessed himself. He wondered why he was seeing so much of their thoughts and emotions right now. It was a fickle talent at the best of times, seeming to turn itself on and off at its own choosing, but now, he could see his companion's auras even with his eyes closed. Perhaps there was indeed some powerful magic in those caves, possibly lingering on them still. He reminded himself that it was useless to try and understand his unwanted gift, and that he shouldn't have been trying to use it anyway.

"That's enough rest," Sam said, rising to his feet. While he stretched himself to his full height, standing strong, Evan could see that the tension in his brows remained.

"You sure you're okay?" James asked.

"Oh, aye," Sam said in a cheery tone. "It'll take more than that to put an Oneron down."

They continued their journey through the rocky desert. When they crested a low rise, they saw the ground descended to a valley of rock and reddish sand. Sparse shrubs and gnarled, leafless trees dotted the landscape, with a dusty, grey road running into the distance. A warm breeze blew over them, along with a cloud of sharp stones and dust.

"There we are." Sam gestured ahead. "Toolin."

Evan followed his gesture, to where the road ran through a cluster of small buildings, around a thousand yards ahead.

"That is our destination?" Evan asked. He had heard them mention the town's name before, but was still becoming accustomed to the surrounding lands. It had only been two days since he was teleported onto this planet.

Sam nodded as he stepped down the dusty rock. "That's our next stop. We can find some transport there to take us to Riondon."

"That's where we'll find this Higero Jaxx guy, right?" James asked.

"Aye," Sam said. "For now though, we can find some supplies in Toolin, and a nice tavern to rest a while. Dr. Velome told us his meeting with Jaxx is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon, so we have at least until then to reach the Riondon iron forge, before Jaxx grows suspicious of the doctor's absence."

Evan looked to Sam. "And you believe that Higero Jaxx is involved in the mass disappearances across the galaxy?"

"We don't know anything yet," Sam said. "Just speculation. We believe he has ties to Sacre, in some way. And they're our number one suspect. Whoever is abducting people across the galaxy, Jaxx may be our first lead to figuring out who that is."

Evan thought on this. Images of war flashed through his mind; invading forces ravaging his homeland. War ships pummeling the earth, sorcery filling the air. "Sacre. You said they could lead me to the man who destroyed my home."

"The Arbiter, you called him," Sam said. "Yes. Whoever he is, we can be sure to track him through his dealings with Sacre."

Evan nodded. A well of hatred rose in him, tensing his shoulders. The Arbiter had conspired with the War King, Nam Anaam, and was responsible for the destruction of Evan's land, leaving his people without a home. Tens of thousands of Voarn were back home, hiding throughout the land, waiting for him to return and overthrow the Arbiter. If only James Island had been the great hero Evan expected him to be. Why else would the god's tell him to find James.

"Dr. Velome was tied up and threatened when we questioned him," James said. "You sure we can trust everything he told us?"

"He mostly confirmed the suspicious Den and I already had," Sam said. "But, there's only one way to find out, and that's to confront Higero Jaxx and find out what he's doing at the Riondon forge."

"And," James said, "when we get to Jaxx, then what? We just ask him what his secret plans are at the forge?"

"I have a plan for that."

James eyed him. "You have that look, Sam. What's the plan?"

"We'll get into that once we're in town, preferably sitting with a cold drink."

"Some plan making would be good," James said. He sighed harshly. "Blight, Sam. Your satchel. I'm so sorry. We lost everything in there."

Sam nodded gravely. "It's no one's fault."

"We are without our food and water," Evan said. "Although we can find those supplies in the town ahead."

"That's not a problem," Sam said. "And aside from my sat-com and a change of clothes, we lost my camera too. Which had photos of the documents we found in the warehouse in Tyken Town. I was going to look over them and see what information we can find."

James shook his head, clearly flustered. "And we've lost all of it. We could have had all the answers we needed in those photos."

"Or it could have been nothing," Sam said. "It's not your fault, James. We just have to keep moving forward."

"And all the gold coins you took from that room," James said.

"We'll never know if spending it would've cursed us or not," Sam said. "I have some money still, in my coin pouch, so we're okay there."

James nodded, and fell silent with a troubled expression.