

## Chapter Forty Four: A New Day - Part Two

Den nodded slowly with understanding. "Hayden gave strict instructions that James must not know of his past, or the knowledge could reverse the healing spell and send him back to his impending death."

"I know," Sam quickly said. "I know all that. And I don't believe it anymore. James has shown that he can handle anything we throw at him."

"I believe he can, also."

Sam held Den's intense stare. "Good." He'd expected more resistance. James had, for the second time in his life, been close to death. It had been a miracle he'd survived his multiple injuries. Sam didn't know what he would have done with himself if he had lost James. Lost another person under his protection.

Melida placed her cup onto the table and looked up at them all with her hands in her lap. She had a straight-backed posture, and looked very elegant in her close-fitting long robe. "I am very happy that you all returned safe. And with permission, I will be performing a farewell prayer this evening for the nine soldiers we lost yesterday."

"I believe that is a very good idea," Evan said beside her. "If I may, I will assist you in blessing their souls."

"Thank you, both," Liana said.

Sam had to wonder where the souls of the hundreds of people he'd lost had gone to. Were they in some form of a heavenly existence? Some kind of magical realm that was beyond their comprehension. Or did a person simply vanish into nothing when they died? Sam wasn't sure of anything, but liked to think that regardless of what happened to a person's soul, what was truly important was how that person was remembered and loved. Celebrating life mattered more than grieving for where a lost loved one had gone to.

Sam reached over and picked up his cup of tea from a side table, and felt a twinge of pain move through his side. An echo of a crippling pain in his broken ribs. Ribs that had not really been broken. His injuries during his fight with Jaxx at the cliff top had mostly been psychological, Sam understood that now, and he had since come to compare that psychological pain with his old war trauma. In both instances, pain was very real, and yet mostly only in his head.

Pain was only there, and could only cripple him, if he allowed it to.

Evan cleared his throat, supporting himself on an arm rest as he rose to his feet. "If you will excuse me, I would like to check on James."

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Blinding flashes of light cut through the crumbling darkness. Excruciating pain in a collapsing world of metal and fire. Vivid images came to James's blurred, semi-conscious mind. Large pieces of metal fell towards him as the iron forge tower broke apart, exploding with an incredible power that expanded to fill his vision. Then there was wind on his face as someone carried him out in the bright daylight. Somewhere within the darkness, Liana's voice had come to him, reassuring yet shaken. Then there was only an empty void.

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Evan watched as James Island awoke, his eyes slowly opening and finding Evan sitting beside his bed. It took James a moment to situate himself in the room, finding his bearings as Evan felt the pulses of his dull racing mind.

The remnants of large cuts and bruising remained on James's face, heavily healed but still visible. His eyes were blood-shot but showed a gradual awareness as they settled on Evan. The rest of James, covered in bandages, was under the light blue sheet of his medical bed. Consoles and units were arranged behind the bed, softly humming and giving off an occasional beep.

"It has been a day since our battle with Higer Jaxx," Evan said. "You were in a critical condition when we found you in the rubble of the tower. I am told you are stable now, but you must go slow to begin with."

James attempted to speak, having to lick his dry lips and clear his throat, yet he looked too pained to find his voice. His head settled on his pillow as he looked at Evan.

"I must apologise to you," Evan said, shifting his stool to sit closer. "I was hard on you. And I was not sympathetic or understanding to your plight. But now I understand how strong of a heart you have. You are a capable fighter, and a good man, James Island. You have always tried to look out for me and protect me, even if it were beyond your means." Evan swallowed as he searched for his next words.

"The Light Gods told me that for me to find the saviour of my people, I would have to find the one named James Island. I of course understood that to mean you, James, would be the saviour I needed. And yet now I believe I misunderstood. Through our battles with Jaxx, I have determined that *I* need to be the saviour my people need. I believe that I needed to accompany you on your journey to put an end to Jaxx's plans, in order to find my own strength and determination. And our experiences together led me to this outpost, where the good Oneron here will send a squadron back with me to recover my land from its occupying forces. None of this would have been possible if I had not been sent to find you."

James's jaw tightened as he struggled to work his throat. He swallowed and said in a hoarse voice, "I'm glad to have met you." He gave Evan a weak smile. He still appeared to be in a very weakened state.

Evan smiled back, which quickly left him when he thought of his next words. "I wish for you to know something. When I healed your hand, I felt a shocking, dark power snap back at me. It worried me for some time, and I should have said something earlier. At first, I thought the dark power came from inside me, and that may be the case still, but I am sure that it was an external force. Something I found in the moment of our connection. I thought you should know this, and I wanted to know what you thought of it."

Something passed through James's blood-shot eyes, though Evan couldn't be sure on his readings of James while he himself had not fully recovered from his injuries. His gift had been mostly non-existent since the battle, save for some mild impulses of thoughts or feelings, but the coloured splashes over people's heads had not shown themselves for over a day now. Runn had also been dormant for some time. Evan wondered if the demon inside him was allowing him to recover, or if the demon was also recovering from its contribution to the battle.

"Thank you for telling me," James said quietly. "I wish I could tell you what you felt. But I don't know what to say." He looked away from Evan's searching gaze.

Evan nodded. It was obvious there was a great deal of conflict inside James. There was certainly a lot more to him than Evan had originally thought. And also, something deeply hidden, inside him. Locked away. Perhaps even hidden from James himself. Once Evan's ability found its strength, he would be sure to try and pry any secrets hidden away inside James's mind.

What was most intriguing to Evan was the similarity of the dark power he'd felt in James's hand, and the power that that ripped the iron forge tower apart.

Evan found himself frowning as he regarded James. Perhaps if he had bonded with James better, the two of them would have had a more open and trusting dialogue. If they had managed to become closer friends, maybe James would be able to confide in him. Not trusting people was something Evan had been doing for a long time now, and he knew he had to rectify that. He hoped he had learned his lesson and would be able to talk to people more in order to better understand them, and really know what they are thinking. Perhaps Evan had relied on his gift for too long, and had not developed a strong enough understanding of how to interact with people.

"I will let you rest," Evan said. He reached out and patted James gently on his arm.

As Evan rose to stand, Reisa came to him. A flash of thought that contained both Reisa and Melida.

He wished to have had become better friends with James, like he had bonded with Melida. Evan considered Melida a kindred spirit, and a part of him had felt guilty at enjoying the company of someone he felt bonded to. The only other person he had felt a connection with was Reisa. While Evan enjoyed Melida's company merely as a friend, who also had a keen

interest in the sorcerous arts, he understood that it was possible for him to bond with other girls now. Perhaps he would even love again.

In that moment, as he stood beside James, Evan felt good about himself, and his future. He knew that he would have to put Reisa behind him, and move on without her having a hold over him. He would aim to live a life with the support of her memory, rather than it holding her back.

Evan understood that he would be stronger with the bonds he made with people. With James. With Melida. And even with Runn. The demon had proved he could be useful when Evan unleashed that torrent of power over Vogri. Evan would have to learn to trust people more, and open himself up to them. And he would be stronger for it.

He left the medical room, looking back to see James had closed his eyes and leaned his head back, and wondered what the old Cenasure Elapore would say once he saw Evan again. The wiseman would surely sense the change in Evan.

Evan smiled as he walked down the hallways, feeling tension leave his shoulders. It began to sink in. He would soon be on his way home.