

Chapter Thirty Nine: Potions - Part One

Several people stood around the white-walled room. Evan's awakening mind focused and he saw he was on a bed, in a medical room of the Oneron Outpost. Across from him, Sam Hawkings also lay under the thin white sheet of a bed, with Liana standing over him. The soft beeping of machinery came to Evan, as did the low murmurs of concerned talk amongst Jorak and Den. A door on one side led to another room, where he could see the ends of a row beds.

Someone shifted closer, and Evan looked up to see Castan sitting beside his bed. Castan smiled at him, though his eyes were tense with concern. The wave of relief from him rippled over Evan.

"How are you, Evan?" Liana asked, coming over to him. Her arms were wrapped around her in a hugging gesture, and she also looked frail and weary, with faint scarring on her forehead. Though even a weary Liana still held a firm and formidable stature.

"I have been better," Evan said, finding his voice hoarse. He cleared his throat and added, "But I will recover quickly. I must return for James."

"You sound like Sam," Liana said. "But, neither of you are well enough to return to the iron forge. My men and I will get James, and Jaxx."

"Don't listen to them, Evan," Sam called out from across the room. "We'll be going back with Liana, don't you worry."

"How long have we been here?" Evan asked.

"Two hours," Liana said. "Three hours since you left the iron forge."

"Three hours that James has been with the enemy," Evan said, frowning.

"We'll be going back for him, be sure of that," Liana said.

Evan attempted to rise and his head swam with dizziness.

Castan placed a hand gently on his shoulder. "That young lady, Melida, did some impressive tricks to heal you fellas, but you two should keep resting. She told us that over-straining can reduce, or even reverse, the healing effects."

Evan nodded, grimacing, and took a moment for his head to stop throbbing. He reached a hand under the covers and found a bandage had been wrapped around his upper torso, and there was a dull tenderness of a recently healed wound. He noted the smooth skin on his

side, feeling no trace of scarring. His trousers were gone, too; replaced with grey shorts that seemed too large for him.

"Where is she?" he asked.

"In her room," Liana told him. "She had to lie down."

Evan had no doubt Melida would have given everything she had in order to heal both him and Sam. It was the kind of person she was.

Liana took a cup from a side table and handed it to Evan. "Warmed sagka," she said. "For your strength."

Castan helped Evan to sit up in the bed. Evan held the cup up and studied the dark contents. He leaned his head forward and took a tentative sip. There was a faint sweet taste, but nothing more. It seemed drinkable. A warm sensation flowed through him, as though he was waking from a slumber.

His boots were nearby, he saw, and a cream shirt was over Castan's chair. He couldn't see his sword anywhere, but suspected that it may be with Melida.

"My clothes?" he asked.

"Your tunic was soaked in blood," Liana told him. "And your trousers need mending. We will try and restore them."

Evan frowned deeply. His clothes and his sword were his only possessions from his home world. He wasn't sure how he felt about not wearing his clothes. He tried not to think about losing sight of the person he was, or the losses he continued to amass.

"You were saying, General?" Sam said, looking up at Jorak.

"We have men preparing to leave as we speak," Jorak said, stepping closer to Sam's bed. "Liana will lead the team head on, and I will have a back-up team nearby, in case the fight gets taken away or the town is put in danger."

"We have injured men," Liana said. "We have even less to send out now."

"What happened to you?" Evan asked. He had already begun to get a vague sense from her, but was too tired to focus on the images coming to him.

Liana shook her head. "Our ships were attacked on route to the iron forge. Jaxx's bodyguard, the big dJuggen, led sixty guards to us, and they had brought some powerful guns with them. Being outside of town, they figured they could use bigger firepower. The Carnan Sand Dunes have a few less cliffs and hills now."

"Did we lose anyone?" Sam asked carefully.

Liana nodded gravely. "Lincey, Olavan, Tozzomoda, Keamy, Trice. Jaxx's man blew the cliff side and many fell. Five of ours, several of theirs, including the bodyguard."

Sam held a severe look. "I'm so sorry," he said quietly.

Liana nodded dully, looking at the ground.

"I called Liana straight away," Castan said. "But there was no response. And so I stayed nearby, but... was too afraid to run into the fight. But when I saw the soldiers go in, I took the chance to get you fellas out."

"You did good, Castan," Sam said.

Castan looked away with a tense, conflicted expression. His inability to help was weighing him down, Evan saw. But there was a lot more to it than that.

"You were very brave," Den said to Castan. He sat against the wall with his braced leg outstretched. "Lesser men would have run. It takes a far braver man to stand firm and know when to strike, and when a fight is beyond him. You have all our thanks."

Castan nodded again and gave a small smile, although his mood did not brighten.

"Have we heard anything from the iron forge?" Evan asked. "Do we know anything about James?"

"The place has been quiet since the struggle," Jorak said. "There've been several newscasts all over about the fight, but Jaxx's people are saying it was an attack from an unknown group, likely a part of the organisation who has been vocally against him since he bought the forge. They're saying everything is now under control and apologise for the alarm and confusion."

"He knows how to play the town," Sam said.

"He has a strong knowledge of Illusion sorcery," Evan said. "Perhaps that aids him in gaining their favour."

"That'll explain how he got away with all the explosions and gunfire," Jorak said. "And why his forge isn't swarming with Red Guards and Judges."

"He has done well to keep his magic ability from public knowledge, and off his records," Liana said.

Den nodded slowly, resting his chin on his fist. "Jaxx can no longer transport his armaments out of town. With eyes on the forge, he won't risk the move. It gives us some time to mount our counter attack. There is no doubt he plans on leaving again, but we'll have to catch him before he does."

"We'll show him how under control things are," Sam said, "when we storm the forge and take it all from him."

Liana said, "We will need force to get to Jaxx, and to get James out. But there are not many of us here. We can afford twenty-five soldiers, maximum. We don't know how many men Jaxx has left, but he has already shown he's got more than we could have anticipated. We're not an army. And we don't have time for one to show up. But we'll do what we can."

"He is not to be underestimated," Evan told them. The effects of Jaxx's sorcery still sent a chill through him. A part of him ached at having seen and felt Reisa again, and every familiar face from his past.

"Agreed," Liana said.

Evan pushed himself further up the bed, groaning. He clutched his bandaged chest and found his body was still very weak. His head had cleared up somewhat from the sagka, but he would have to take things slow. Castan reached out to him.

"I am fine, thank you." Evan held up a hand. He sat with his legs hanging over the bed. His right thigh was also bandaged, and a quiet ache throbbed from his wound. Rubbing his eyes, he assessed himself. There were no lasting injuries that would hold him back for long, he decided. Neither was there any sign of the demon inside him.

Evan looked up at Liana and Jorak. "What is the plan for right now?"

"My men are readying to leave shortly," Liana said. "And patching up a few that can still fight."

"May we have one more hour?" Evan asked. "To prepare ourselves and return our strength."

"Some more sagka would do good, too," Sam said from his bed.

Liana looked back and forth between them, her dark eyes shifting, calculating. "You have as much sagka as your bodies can take. Overdosing will only reverse its effects. You know this, Sam."

Sam held her look. "We're still going," he said gently.

"James may not have another hour," Liana said.

"Jaxx's men wouldn't have taken him, if they just wanted him dead," Sam said. His brows tensed as something seemed to occur to him. "Maybe that's why he survived the fight. But anyway, we have to assume that Jaxx wants to keep him alive. And we'll be a stronger force with Evan and me there."

Liana shook her head, defeated. "You have one hour. If you're still not fully healed, then you stay. No arguments."

"Very well," Evan said. He turned to Castan and lowered his voice. "Would you see me to Melida's quarters?"

Castan smiled at him. "It would be my honour to escort you."

Castan took Evan's arm and helped him off the bed. A blocky mech that Evan had mistaken for a console unit wheeled closer, alarm bells ringing and lights flashing. Evan reeled back at the sudden presence.

"It's okay," Liana said, tapping into a control panel by its head. "This was looking over your vital signs. You startled it by getting up so quickly."

"I startled it?" Evan said, bemused.

The alarm bells stopped and mechanisms whirled to a low pitch as the mech powered down. "He won't follow you everywhere, now," Liana said.

Castan brought Evan's boots over and began to pull them onto Evan's feet. Evan dismissed him politely and pulled on the boots himself. After trying and failing to pull on the cream shirt over his head, he allowed Castan to help him with that. The short-sleeved shirt was loose and felt odd on him, with a heavy material that scratched at his skin. He tried not to think how odd he appeared, in the shorts and shirt.

"One hour," Evan said to the room as he stood, and looked over at Sam.

"Or less," Sam said confidently.

Evan noted that Sam had not moved from his lying position yet, and wondered if his injuries had been more severe than he sounded.

Castan led Evan out the room, keeping a hand by his elbow. Going through the warm, stale-aired corridors, Evan found his strength slowly returning. He could not imagine pushing himself with his sword or using sorcery – the thoughts themselves caused his legs to weaken – but there would be nothing to stop him from rescuing James when the time came.

When Jaxx's illusions had been overwhelming Evan, it were James who had appeared as the Elder Cenasure. A figure whom Evan respected and admired above all others living. And, James had shown himself as a competent fighter on the field. Evan was starting to understand that he had been seeing James all wrong.

Castan made some idle talk as Evan directed him towards Melida's quarters. Evan's thigh ached with each step, though he felt as though he was becoming stronger the more he walked.

When they came to her door, Castan left him there, saying he would check to see if he was needed anywhere. Evan noted how determined Castan was to help. He could not aid in a battle, and did not have military training or strategic knowledge, and yet he held himself amongst generals and criminals. There was something to admire with Castan, and yet Evan found it hard to trust him. There was something guarded within Castan, things Evan had only caught glimpses. He had not been focussing on Castan much since they'd met him, but perhaps he needed to keep a closer eye on him.

Evan entered Melida's quarters and found her main room was empty. A warm air blew in from the open window on the side, sunlight streaming onto the sofa chairs and main long table in the centre. He stepped through the quiet room, assuming she was in her bedroom. The large wooden desk in the corner was a mess of vials and coloured crystal shards, spread over several open books. She had been busy there. As he came to her door, her soft voice called out.

"You are awake," she said.

He found her lying on her bed, over the covers. Her dark hair fell over her shoulders in long waves, her pale faced turned to him with a quiet smile.

"As are you," he said, pulling a stool to sit beside her.

"I'm so glad to see you recovering well," Melida said softly. Her eyes were tired and strained, as if the light was too bright for her. "I like your new clothes."

"You should not have exerted yourself so much to heal us." Evan found himself also speaking softly, holding back the deep concern from his voice.

"Oh hush," she said with a weak smile. "You should have seen yourselves when you came in. I couldn't leave you in that state. And I had some help. Some of the soldiers have practised and studied the healing arts. But as you know, magically healed wounds still require a lot of rest, and so you shouldn't be exerting yourself. I wasn't surprised that Sam recovered well enough, as Oneron have very strong bodies and heal quickly. I'm glad to see the Voarn are made of strong stuff, too."

Evan watched her while she spoke, smiling. Despite the pain in his chest and leg, he found himself strengthened by her presence.

"Thank you, for all your help," he said.

Melida's eyes widened, suddenly remembering something. "Oh, I had meant to give you news when I next saw you." She pointed her chin behind him. "The gold and brown hardback book. The one on my study. It's open on the pages of interest."

Evan went back into the other room and retrieved the heavy book from the desk, clearing away several crystal shards from it. He came back to Melida's bedside and found her sitting up, with pillows piled up behind her against the headboard.

He paused. "I should bring you something. Water? Can I make you a hot drink, perhaps? Ahm..." He looked around, at a loss.

"Oh, no, I am fine, really," she said, smiling deeply. "I do have something for you. But first, the book."

Evan nodded, remembering the book in his hands. He sat down and turned it for them both to see. The pages mostly consisted of small text, but then his heart jumped when he saw the depiction of the golden sceptre.

"Recognise anything?" Melida asked.

"You found it."