

Chapter Twenty Five: A Soldier's Sorrow - Part One

Sam Hawkings looked over the weaponry in the small room.

He stood quietly, taking in the sight of the hanging swords and staffs, the knives and pistols on the shelves, and the rifles on display. It had been some time since he'd seen an arsenal like this, and it gave him an uneasy pause.

"So things have been quiet lately?" Sam asked Jorak.

The huge man stood closely beside Sam in the confines of the weapons room, which was little more than a metal alcove in the wall. Four men could comfortably stand shoulder to shoulder in the room, although Jorak was big enough for two men at least.

"There's always something happening around these parts," Jorak said. His deep voice took on a gravelly tone when he spoke quietly. "While the Canarrian government would prefer we stay out of their planet's affairs, they do come to us for help or looking for intel from time to time. There was a small rebellion down in the southern isles a while back, where we stepped in to maintain order. Last season we uncovered a band of insane desert wanderers who were killing anyone they came across. You don't want to know what they did with the bodies."

Sam nodded, looking over the armoury as he listened. "How many do you have here?"

"Over fifty on the last count," Jorak said. "Thirty soldiers, a handful of cadets, and the rest are staff with basic training."

"Not all Oneron, though?" Sam asked. He had definitely seen some soldiers earlier that didn't look Oneron, and an alien who wasn't compatible to mate with humanoids, and so not able to inherit the Oneron blood.

"Twelve Oneron, including Liana and myself. The rest are a mix. A couple of Zianni and Altenine. Good soldiers."

Jorak was quiet a moment, before he said, "We lost Dulsten. A few seasons back."

A cold shiver ran through Sam. He cursed quietly. "How?"

"Aircraft crash. They were transferring civilians from their burning transport onto their ship in mid-air. Dulsten helped get them all to safety, but when one of the younger civ's lost their footing, he did all he could to get her into the ship. He went down with the transport ship while the others got to safety."

Sam swallowed, his chest tightening. That all sounded far too familiar to him. "How has Liana been?"

It couldn't have been easy for her, losing her partner like that. Liana and Dulsten had been a long-term couple for many years. One of the best suited couples Sam had ever known.

"It hit her hard," Jorak said. "She's only recently taken control of the outpost again, after taking some time off."

Sam shook his head. Dulsten was a good man. Headstrong and ambitious. It was never easy losing a good soldier, and a good friend.

"She didn't say anything," Sam muttered. He shook his head again and looked around, picking up a pistol and examining it. They had come to find a gun for Sam to carry, although he was finding it difficult to concentrate on any of the weapons. Thoughts of lost soldiers troubled him, blurring his thoughts. It took him a moment to realise Jorak was silently watching him.

"How long has it been for you?" Jorak asked, his brows lowered with sincerity.

Sam turned away from the gun. "How long?"

"Since you last fought."

"Well if we're talking about using a sword and fighting for my life, then not too long ago."

Jorak frowned. That clearly wasn't the answer he was looking for.

"Four years," Sam said softly. "Four years since I last served. Since I was a General." He looked away, trying not to fall too much into thought.

"I'd say it's been a lot longer than that." Jorak sighed, shaking his head. "What happened to you, lad? I mean, I heard what happened. But... you were one of the good ones. Great ones. And then you just disappeared."

Sam replaced the gun and looked over a selection of knives, although he stared without focus. What could he tell him? How could he tell him what it was like to lose all those soldiers? Jorak had been through his share of wars, they both knew the countless lives that had been lost. The friends that were gone and the families destroyed.

The deaths of everyone under Sam's command was something he had to live with for the rest of his life. Something he could never forget. So many lives had been destroyed because of his leadership. Because he wasn't good enough to protect them.

"I shouldn't be surprised," Jorak said. "Disappearing was what you did best."

Sam looked up at him. "That's not fair."

"But it's true. You know she asked about you for years after you graduated."

"Liana and I would never have been good together. Not like that." And it was true. Sam and Liana had been about as close as two people could get, once, but that was a very long time ago. Time even before he had met Dana, when he realised what it truly meant to love someone.

"Not that you gave yourselves a chance," Jorak said, his eyes hard. "That is some men's way, however. They run when things get difficult. I saw it in you even when you were a child."

Sam kept his gaze low. Old arguments with Jorak came back to him. Jorak screaming 'coward' at him. "We were never meant to be," Sam whispered. "And the soldering wasn't for me."

"It isn't for any of us, son," Jorak said, his voice softening. They stood in silence for a moment. "That's the nature of war. The nature of life. Now, you don't want a lecture from me. Heart knows that I'm not one to give advice. If I did, however, I'd say that you shouldn't let the past dictate your future, or ruin your present. We've all seen and done many things that we shouldn't possibly be allowed to endure. But we do. That's what we do."

Sam finally turned to Jorak, grimacing. Grief caught his throat and overwhelmed him. Sam had worked so hard for years to hide his expressions, to keep his inner emotions out of his countenance. It was easier for people not to be aware of how much he hurt inside. How dead he felt at times. But somehow in that moment with Jorak – a man who was usually full of bluster, now so quiet and soft – Sam couldn't hide his sorrow.

"And if we can't endure?" he whispered.

"Then we find strength in others, until we find our own."

Sam nodded. It had been some time since he thought of himself a soldier. A part of him had actually begun to enjoy the role he played in Tyken Town: Sam the construction worker. But if there was something he had been trying to get through to James, it was that you can't hide from the past.

For James, however, the past was unknown. Sam only wished his own past could vanish.

Jorak laid a hand on Sam's shoulder. "Listen. Your sword and grapple hook are still here. I didn't tell anyone you stored them here two years ago. Why don't you take them now that you're back?"

Sam considered this, but found his answer easy enough. "I have a capable sword, and no need for a grapple hook." He expected the harsh look that Jorak gave him. An Oneron without a grapple hook – denying himself his own grapple hook – was unheard of. To some, a grapple hook was their lifeblood; an extension of themselves.

But there was more to it than that. Jorak knew the history with Sam's sword, and the awful truth buried inside it.

"They are waiting for you, nonetheless." Jorak squeezed Sam's shoulder lightly and then let go. The large man appeared to have softened a little in his older age. There was more understanding in his eyes than Sam remembered. Maybe Sam just remembered him as a blustering force of tension, the kind of man that would bring instant fear and discipline to young children. "Those are some wounds," Jorak said, nodding at the long scars showing on Sam's neck. The skin underneath had mostly healed, but without a high level Restoration spell, the scars and discomfort would remain.

"It's fine," Sam said, clearing his throat to strengthen his voice. "It doesn't hurt any more."

"We can have someone take a look at it?"

Sam shook his head. "Evan gave it a quick heal before."

If he were honest he'd tell Jorak that he'd been using the injury as more of an excuse not to push himself too far in battle. As rusty as Sam might have become, having neglected his training for some years now, he still wasn't ready to fully become the soldier he once was. Why would he want to be that man again?

Abyss fend, Sam thought. *How did I end up back here? I'm not one of them, any more.* A part of him had never wanted to see any of these people again. Their reminder of a past he wanted to forget was too much for him to handle.

"That Voarn you have with you," Jorak said. "Who is he? He's an odd sort, that's for sure."

"He's become a part of James's journey, somehow. He can be hard to talk to, and has his moments, but he's harmless."

"Andeo told Liana that he offered a changed of clothes to Evan. The Voarn refused outright, saying he would not part with his clothes even if they were on fire. And you've seen the state he's in."

Sam chuckled darkly. "That sounds like him, aye. I think at this point, those clothes and his sword are his only links to his homeland."

Jorak looked unconvinced. "Odd fellow," he muttered.

"There they are."

Sam turned to see Liana walking down the corridor with James.

"How was our student?" Jorak asked them.

"Top of his class," Liana said. "For someone's apparent first time, he did well."

"The benefits of a good teacher," James said, smiling.

James's hair looked washed and he wore a dark blue shirt now. After their travels through the desert, Sam could do with a change of clothes too.

"What are you boys up to? Liana asked them.

Sam picked up the pistol he had been eyeing. A BG Arc Transformer. "Borrowing this," he said, and collected a metal bracelet displayed beside the gun.

"I'm guessing that isn't just a fashionable item," James said.

"Well it may not be this year's popular trend," Sam said, clicking the bracelet onto his wrist, "but it does go well with the gun, don't you think?"

"A Trigger switch," James said. "There's one inside the bracelet."

Sam nodded. "It's biometric prints allow me, and only me, to fire the gun."

"I've read all about the armament restrictions," James said, feeling like they were all staring at him. He felt like a child taking a surprise assessment. "It's just... seeing them first hand like this is a bit new for me. Aside from the gloves that the Lawmen wear in Tyken Town, that is."

"Care for one yourself?" Sam asked lightly. "We can find a nice blue one to match your shirt."

James shook his head. "Not really for me. Let me get used to a sword, first of all, then we'll talk about guns."

Sam regarded James while he strapped the gun's holster around his waist. He noticed James casting quick, uneasy glances at him. James almost seemed... uncomfortable. Troubled? Then Sam wondered if something had happened during his training session with Liana.

"Speaking of getting used to a sword," Liana said, nudging her way into the room. "How about something better than your Tridonite, James?"

She unhooked a silver-handled blade and brought half of it out of the sheath, showing it to James. "This is a Sho-Dan Champion sword. Omega plated dion-steel, triple layered vibro coating, with an easy grip and weighted balance." She slid the sword back into the sheath and held it out to James. "A gift from me."

James took the sword. "It sounds.... very impressive. Thank you." He placed a hand on the sword at his hip. "How about a swap? I won't need two swords."

"We'll take that swap," Liana said. James handed her his old sword and she held it up. "What moonbrain chose this sword for you?"

James chuckled. "Ah, that would be our mutual acquaintance.

Sam shook his head with a smile. "She knows. She's just teasing."

"I like to fun, sometimes," Liana said teasingly.

Sam wondered if they told James that Oneron wielded two swords that he would then reluctantly carry both on him. So far James had been mostly accepting of everything he was told. Sam bit back the wicked thought of teasing James, knowing he could be sensitive about the things that should be obviously known.

James began strapping on the sheath of his new sword. It joined the knife and his father's grapple hook on his belt. James had come a long way in just a few days, Sam noted with some pride. James was far more capable than he realised, and could go beyond what any of them could teach him. Sam was sure of it.

A chill ran through Sam as he recalled the last words Hayden Island had said to him. *He must never remember.*

"What's to stop us just shooting everyone who carries a sword or staff?" James asked.

"Quick reflexes, for one," Jorak said. "If you go up against a seasoned warrior, especially an Oneron, they won't need a shield to dodge whatever you can fire at them."

"That's not exactly true," Liana said dryly. "What he means is that many talented soldiers can deflect a gunshot or electric blast with their swords. Some swords even have an extended shield field around them that widens the surface area of protection. And of course us Oneron have our protective Light Shields we can summon. There are many variations of magic shields in other classes too."

"There's always a good old fashioned dodge and weave," Jorak said. "Get in close enough for gun wielders to wish they had a sword to defend themselves."

"And not to mention a good old fashioned magic bolt thrown at them," Sam added. "Magic can be a powerful tool in warfare."

James nodded. Sam noticed the hesitant glance his way as James refocused on his sword sheath. There was definitely something on James' mind.

"Where's Evan?" James asked as he finally looked up at them. "And Castan?"