

## Chapter Thirty One: Reunion - Part Two

"Part of his derangement," Den said. "Or his own confusion. Why he would think such a thing, we can't know. Therefore we cannot really trust anything he said to you."

James's argument with Sam in the Grillock Caves came back to him in flashes. James had been given a life that hadn't allowed him to make meaningful relationships. Heat rushed through him. He could only stare at the ground. "So this Dark Sorcerer knows where I am now? He'll be coming for me?"

The hard lines of Den's chiselled face were highlighted in the bright light, making him look like a statue. "We don't know how much he saw. He may still not know your exact location, but has a point in the galaxy to explore now. Which means, sometime soon, it would be a good idea for you to leave Carnan."

"*Why* is he after me?"

"The warlord, Doon," Den began, "is a formidable adversary. Somehow, he has struck a deal with the Dark Sorcerer, and they are both looking for you. They mean to finish off what they started. All we know is that while Hayden is missing, likely hidden within the hidden armies being formed, Doon and the Dark Sorcerer still want you dead. And it is our task to make sure that doesn't happen."

Once again, James felt like he was being told a lot while not being told anything at all. None of this was any kind of proper answer for him. "But what's so special about me? They really can't stand me being alive?"

"We can't say, but you are a very talented soldier who had been making a name for himself, rising up the ranks. Not to mention the son of a famous war hero. To take you down would be a crippling blow to both Hayden and our Oneron forces. If they had more plans for you, we couldn't say what they were."

James thought on that and frowned. "So I'm in danger because I'm so great?"

A corner of Den's mouth rose. "To put it that way, yes."

"But I'm not that man anymore," James said. "I mean, it didn't end so well when I tried to use magic."

Den perked up, looking disturbed. The motion surprised James.

"What do you mean?" Den asked.

"I..." James suddenly felt self-conscious. Den was watching him a little too hard. "I burned my hand when conjuring fire magic. It was okay though. It hurt like hell, but Evan healed

me quickly." He left out the part where Evan seemed to suffer a great shock when he'd healed James's hand.

"I'm doing okay with my sword training," James added, trying to sound hopeful. "I think."

Den smiled, creasing his stone features and making him look human again. "I don't doubt that. It's as Sam and I have said, you just need to believe in yourself more."

"Think less, act more," James said sullenly. "Right." He paused, and then met Den's eyes. "I have a Sacre Trigger Switch in my palm. Do you know anything about that?"

Den's face registered an obvious surprise. "I don't. What did Sam think of it?"

"He said there were no records of me ever working with Sacre. But, if I was working for them and no one knew about it, I don't know how there'd be any data to find."

Den nodded thoughtfully. "I see. This doesn't change anything, however, James. Everything we've said remains true."

"I'll look into it," said a voice.

James turned and saw Liana leaning against the doorway. Her figure framed against the light was a welcomed sight, and his heart raced at seeing her. She pushed off the frame and stepped closer.

"Please and thank you," Den said.

"How are you?" James asked, and immediately thought the words came out as too personal. What he'd learned earlier came back to him – Liana's boyfriend having been killed recently - and a part of James felt an urge to console her. But of course that would be ridiculous to do right then. "How did it go at the Iron Forge?" he added.

"A few surprises. We had some cuts and bruises, but all good now. I asked Evan to come down, but he's adamant at staying with Melida. Those two seem to be getting on well."

"I look forward to meeting her," James said. He couldn't help but wonder what kind of person she was, that Evan would be enjoying her company so much. Maybe James could learn something from her to help Evan like him better.

"She's not much for crowds, but she'll be at dinner tonight."

Liana looked back towards the door. "Sam and Jorak should be with us shortly. Then we can get started." Her dark eyes turned to James and held him close, as if she were trying to read him. "Sorry to interrupt, James. Hope you don't mind us taking over your conversation."

"Of course," James said. He had a hundred more things to say to Den, but for now felt somewhat better about things. Even if he still thought none of it made sense. Den gave him a comforting look that told him they would speak more later.

Movement came from the doorway. Sam came in, followed by Jorak, whose large form just about fit through the entrance. Castan came in behind them, smiling at them all.

"Ready to go when you are," Sam said, sitting himself on the other end of the sofa by Den. "Evan?"

"He'll join us later," Liana said.

Jorak settled himself on a low chest of drawers against the wall, which creaked under his weight. "Debrief away."

"Right," Liana said, looking over them all and folding her arms. "So, Evan and I had a look over the iron forge. What we found was mostly as the newscasts had reported. All clear and on the up. Until we found another factory on a higher level. This one was mass producing armaments on a large scale. Rifles and firearms of all kinds. Enough to arm a small army."

"Given enough time," Sam said, "enough to arm several large armies."

"And," Liana said, "they don't need Trigger Switches. They're free-arms."

This brought a tense silence over the room.

"That definitely was not in the newscasts," Castan said.

"Are you sure about that?" Jorak asked Liana.

"Positive," Castan said. "I'm sure I would've remembered that."

Jorak gave him a humourless look. Castan wilted, smiling sheepishly.

Liana nodded. "We're sure. We've looked through a hard-disk I took from there, and have confirmed this is the case. Jaxx is mass producing thousands of firearms without Trigger Switches. And he is training his soldiers. We saw a firing range with them being instructed with the various weapons. Some of the rifles looked mighty destructive."

James perked up. "Anyone can fire them? So, the guns they had, they didn't need Trigger Switches?"

Folding her arms even tighter across her body, Liana looked thoughtful. "I would guess you came across one of the free-arm rifles earlier. The one you fired."

"But, we can't be sure, right?" James said dully.

"I'll be looking into it," Sam said. "When I get a chance."

Liana nodded. "We have a Switch Detector, downstairs. It's an old one, but it still works. Hopefully we can determine what kind of Switch you have, if we find one."

James met her eyes and gave a small nod. Knowing he could find out for sure if he had a Switch in his palm was somehow little comfort to him.

Jorak rose off the chest of drawers. "So this changes things. Jaxx has gone from a possible threat to a full-blown problem. One that must be stopped."

"He had transport ships, too," Sam said. "Sounds like a lot of them, from what he told James and Castan."

"With his connections," Liana said, "he could be looking to sell the weapons? Ship them in bulk? Perhaps to arm this hidden army you're looking for?"

Den adjusted his seated position, his braced leg remaining outstretched. "We need to confirm how many men Jaxx has gathered," he said. "And then determine if he is arming his own men, or has a greater army to support."

Liana nodded. "Our first guess is Sacre, given the armour of some of his men. But that may be a decoy to throw us off."

"Right," Sam said. "Clothing his soldiers in Sacre gear is a bit too obvious of a move. Even on a remote planet like this there'll be someone who recognises Sacre armour, and it could get back to them. You mentioned Jaxx is making his own armour?"

"I mostly just saw separate pieces on the conveyor belts. The hard drive had blueprints of the armour, but only as outlines, no indication of their colours. I may have seen some of his soldiers wearing the armour he's made, but can't be sure which ones to identify."

"Either way," Sam said. "Hordes of armaments and armour mean he's planning something big."

Liana turned to Jorak and then back to Sam. "Our next move is to bring Jaxx in. He's too dangerous to keep out there."

"Have a nice chat," Jorak said, nodding.

"Right." Liana paused, her expression hardening. "He won't come willingly, and there'll likely be a fight. But we should avoid that if we can."

"Sounds good to me," Sam said, matching Liana's troubled expression.

James had to admire the strength and power emanating from these soldiers. The battles they must have experienced. The assuredness of their actions. Compared to them, he was

just a construction worker with a sword. No, he had to stop thinking like that. He had proven himself well enough so far, even if that had all been running on instinct and luck. But those could only take him so far.

"One more thing," Liana said. "Jaxx has an Oneron. We came across him, and he's good. He even had a Maldrinn. No idea who he is, though."

Sam's brows had tensed. "Not surprising, given the amount of guards Jaxx seems to have collected. But interesting."

"And who knows who else he has," Jorak said.

"We don't have a lot of soldiers to give," Liana said, "but I'll provide what we can. I've sent word to the Avancheon Military, and they understand our concerns and support our investigation. But they don't see Jaxx as a large enough threat for them to fully intervene. They have enough going on right now and can't spare much aid to us. But, they said they will send a support ship with a few soldiers and an official that will liaise with us."

"Typical," Jorak said, grunting. "Ask the higher powers for help when it's needed, and they spout reasons why they won't bother. A few extra men and a suit won't do us much."

"How long until they get here?" Sam asked.

"Two or three days," Liana said with a frown. "They need the official to free up from a few things first."

"They're messing us around," Jorak said. "We're in this on our own."

"We'll send a small team tomorrow to bring Jaxx in," Liana said. "And then go from there. We still have a lot to find out."

Liana made arrangements for another meeting with Jorak after this one, to go over some logistics and outpost business, and announced another group talk in the morning for them all. They would head to Jaxx first thing tomorrow.

James had never felt less prepared in his life.

When it looked like their talk was over—Jorak and Sam had begun a quiet discussion in the corner near Den, and Castan was stretching his arms—James waited to make eye contact with Liana. She stepped closer when she saw him.

"How goes it, soldier?" she said, giving him a warm smile. Her softly perfumed skin invigorated him.

"I'm still trying to figure that out," James said, surprised how easy his honesty came out.

"Come on, we'll find that Switch Detector for you. Get some answers."

"Right. Thank you. So...we have some time before dinner, right?"

Liana nodded. "What are you thinking?"

"The Training Hall."

She smiled, gesturing her head towards the door. "Right. We have time for that, too. Let's go."

James also smiled. Regardless of whether he had a Trigger Switch in his palm or not, and whether it belonged to Sacre or someone else, the only thing that really mattered-the most important thing for him to focus on right then-was more training.

He needed to be ready for whatever lay ahead.