

### **Chapter Thirty Three: Shortcomings - Part Two**

Sam Hawkings made his way through the dimly lit corridors of the outpost. It felt good to walk for a bit, after their large dinner. While it was good to share a meal in pleasant company, Sam hadn't been able to shake the uneasy feeling of being around several Oneron again. His own people reminded him of his time in the military, and the bad memories that would creep up on him, tighten his chest and threaten to take his legs from under him.

The depth of his despair all those years ago still lingered over him, like the whisper of a forgotten dream.

But things were different now, for everyone. James seemed to have come into his own person more, looking relaxed over dinner, and made easy conversation with everyone. Evan also seemed to enjoy himself, although he had mostly spoken to the young girl, Melida, in quiet tones, as though they were not surrounded by others. Castan had proved a great hit with everyone, but it was easy for anyone to get along with him.

Sam turned a corner and headed for their sleeping quarters. He just had one last thing to take care of, and then he could finish the night with a strong drink. Jorak and Den were already getting started on the whisky, and Sam had told them he'd join them shortly.

Ahead, the room beyond the end of the corridor was shrouded in darkness. No one else could be heard. Sam moved slowly and quietly now as he approached the entrance.

He stopped by the doorway and looked down the long rows of bunk beds. Shafts of moonlight cut through the darkness, highlighting a few beds. Several feet away on Sam's right, on the opposite wall, his bunk lay in the shadows.

A dark figure moved over his bed, almost blending in with the darkness.

Sam had anticipated him there, but was disappointed to be proven right. He flicked the light switch on by the door.

The figure by his bed jerked up, suddenly exposed in the light. Wide, fear-stricken eyes stared back at Sam. For a time, they both stared at each other from across the room, a tense air over them.

"Castan," Sam said quietly, stepping forward.

The Canarrian remained with his eyes wide, lips quivering with unspoken words.

He came to Castan and saw he stood over Sam's satchel, open on the bed. A heavy brown sack was in Castan's hands. The bag of gold they had retrieved from Audlin.

"S-Sam," Castan said. He looked down at the sack, and then back to Sam. His mouth opened to say more but nothing came out.

"Was it all about the gold?" Sam asked. "The whole time?"

Castan tried to speak again, had to clear his throat, and then said, "No. Yes. I mean... Sam, you don't understand."

"I understand that coin is more important to you than people. More important than trust and character. A man like that, is no real man at all."

A deep frown lined Castan's troubled face. "I don't know what to say. I... I'll just leave, if you'll let me. I'll go, and I won't come back. You won't see me again." He reached down and dropped the sack on the bed.

"Would you tell me why?" Sam asked.

Castan shook his head. "Nothing can explain this."

"You're not a tour guide, are you?"

Castan's eyes were tense and sorrowful as he looked at Sam and shook his head again.

"You saw the opportunity to snatch a bag of gold and trinkets from a few city folk. And you weren't swayed by our swords, or the fight you had just witnessed. Not even the magic Evan had conjured that exploded two men. And you weren't even put off by a giant space dragon coming after us. Which means this coin was very important for you to have. More important than your own life."

"Without it, I have no life," Castan said quietly.

"Make me understand," Sam said, adding a hardness to his voice that caused Castan to look up sharply. He must have sensed how serious Sam was. Or at least Sam hoped he did.

"Do you know what Keps is?" Castan asked.

"I don't think I've heard of it."

Castan swallowed. He seemed to have difficulty starting; wrestling with his thoughts. He swallowed again and said, "It is a terrible disease. It eats away at your internal organs, slowly, and causes violent shivers. My little boy had this disease."

"You have a son?"

"Had a son," Castan said, his voice taking a gravelly undertone, strained with emotion. "I would have done anything to save him. And I did. I did... something stupid. But I had no other choice. We had no money. I had many debts. And so I stole a valuable dragon egg

from a collector, and sold it for thousands. To pay for my son's treatment." Castan paused, looking away. His breath was short and staggered. When he looked back up at Sam his eyes were shining with moisture.

"Before I could even sell the dragon egg, my town was attacked by an invading force. You know of the Fire Born Brigade, and the sacking of Ipan?"

Sam nodded. This would have been several years back. A disgraced and outcast military group invaded Ipan, their rival village, after decades of turmoil between the two. Ipan had only recently regained independence thanks to support from Victory City.

"We had a chance to flee," Castan went on. "My wife and son and me. While we tried to escape, men who worked for the owner of the dragon egg, which had truly belonged to a crime lord, found me. They allowed my wife and son to be killed by the invading forces, and I could do nothing but watch. And now... now, a year later, they have kept track of me the whole time, telling me to return the dragon egg. Why they have not just killed me, I can't say. But they likely enjoy tormenting me."

"Where is this dragon egg now?"

Castan shook his head and sighed softly. His face was haggard and he looked defeated, more distraught and exhausted than Sam had ever seen him. "Buried somewhere beneath my old home in Ipan. Locked away to this day. Or so I hope. I just need to return to get it."

Sam was beginning to understand now. "Victory City now oversees the restoration of Ipan. The invaded lands are currently under government control."

"I can't return. Not unless I buy my land from them. And for that I need a lot of gold." Castan grimaced, fighting back what Sam guessed were some dark thoughts. "I have never been lucky with money. My wife was the responsible one."

"That sack likely won't cover what you need," Sam told him.

Castan nodded and gave a weak shrug. "I know this. But it would have helped."

"We trusted you, Castan. I considered you a man of integrity from the start. I trusted you with everything we had." What Sam didn't add was that he knew Castan had been lying about being a tour guide. Maybe not from the very start, but he had suspected. While Castan certainly knew a lot about the land of Medropon and its towns, the Canarrian seemed too ill-prepared to be a real guide. Maybe Sam had just wanted to believe he could be trustworthy - his gut feeling told him that Castan was a good man - even if he came to them by deceit.

Castan's eyes were red-rimmed when he finally looked up at Sam. "I am truly sorry. You fellows have been the closest to friends that I've known for a long time." He shook his head,

defeated, and began to take a step away. "Please, just let me leave. I won't bother you again."

Sam held a hand up, pressing it against Castan's chest as the man stopped. His knitted jumper was moist with sweat.

"Wait," Sam said.

Castan turned back to him, his eyes flicking around the area as if stunned he wasn't still walking. A heavy tear ran down his cheek when he blinked.

"What was your boy's name?" Sam asked.

Castan's lips quivered as he said, "Conner."

Sam reached down and lifted the sack from the bed. He held it up to Castan, who remained stunned and unbelieving.

"I want you to take this," Sam said. "And put it towards whatever you need to reclaim your home."

Castan stood frozen, his mouth open, and visibly trembling with suppressed emotion. It pained Sam to see a man so broken. Castan may have come to them as a thief, but Sam couldn't just let the man walk away like this. That the man could have been lying about his story didn't occur to Sam. He knew real torment and anguish when he saw it.

"Take it," Sam said. "You enjoy your free night at the Midgan Casino. And tomorrow, you can go on with your life. I'll explain to the others that you left to return to your tour guide services."

With red-rimmed, glistening eyes, Castan gave a shaky nod. He remained standing there, then cleared his throat. "I don't deserve to have met you."

Sam offered the sack up. The numerous coins and jewels within shifted in his fingers. He didn't know how much the contents were worth, but from a couple of previous glances he would have guessed over ten thousand joul. Not enough buy a house with land. And not enough to buy a life. Sam knew the cost of lives, and there wasn't a vessel large enough to fill with the coin it needed.

Castan finally took the sack from Sam, its weight shifting from one hand to the other. He gave a shaky nod and wiped the back of a hand across his eyes.

"Thank you, Sam. Truly."

Sam nodded, and said no more as he watched Castan leave.