

Chapter Thirty One: Reunion - Part One

Sam flew them back to the outpost in the aircraft. James had been staring out the window with an unfocused gaze for some time. Reaching the docking station and taking off had been a blur, and he felt like he was only just coming back to his senses.

He turned to Sam beside him, swallowing to work moisture back in his throat. "Who were those other soldiers? In the silver and black armour?"

"Sacre Guards," Sam told him.

Castan let out a low breath from the back seat. He had been uncharacteristically quiet since escaping the guards. "Sacre, fai. On this planet?"

"They still might be Jaxx's soldiers in Sacre armour. Or they might be the real deal, brain-washed like the rest of them. Or, bought into Jaxx's employ. But what a big party like Sacre are doing with a small-time arms dealer like Jaxx is up to us to find out."

"Some very big connections," Castan said dully. The mirth and energy had been lost in his voice, and he sat with a shaken, dazed demeanour.

James remained silent, lost in thought, before shaking his head and looking at Sam. "Can you tell me... how I fired one of their rifles? I didn't even think about it when I picked it up, I just wanted to save you."

"And you did," Sam said. "I'm thankful for that. As to how you were able to fire a Sacre weapon, I can't say. And I honestly mean that I don't know. I can guess that you must have one of their Trigger Switches embedded in your palm. That's the standard way without needing a glove or ring or bracelet containing a Switch."

James studied his palm, which still had a patch of rough skin from when he conjured fire magic. "But how, Sam? Why would I have a Sacre Trigger Switch in my hand?"

Sam gave him an apologetic headshake. "There were no records of you ever working with Sacre, as far as I know."

"And how much do you know, exactly? About the old me?"

"Only what I've been told," Sam said. He kept his eyes on the sand dunes ahead and added, "There should be no reason for you to have one of their Switches in your palm. Usually a soldier is equipped with an external Switch, like a glove. An embedded chip is only usually reserved for high ranking authorities, those that have proven their dedication, or by black market procedures."

James studied both his hands now. "Does it matter which hand it's in? I mean, if it's in my left hand can I fire a weapon with my right hand?"

"The Trigger Switch is determined by biometrics and proximity, normally restricted to the one hand."

"It's in my right hand, then," James said thoughtfully, flexing his scarred hand. "I guess that fire damage didn't break the Switch, at least."

James shuddered. He wondered what other secrets the old James Island held from everyone.

"Never seen so many guards in once place before in my life," Castan said to no one in particular. "And they really wanted you fellas."

"Castan, I'm sorry for getting you into this," Sam said over his shoulder. "I never meant for you to come into danger. Once we debrief in the outpost, you'll be free to go. You've more than held up-"

"I'm fine," Castan said. "A little too much excitement for me, aye. But do not worry about me. I am made of thicker material than this." He pulled at his woven jumper.

"Good man," Sam said, and cast a quick look at James. "By the way, James, good work with Jaxx. Both of you. You look like you held yourselves well."

"He was a natural," Castan said. "I forgot who I was sitting with for a minute."

"What did Jaxx say to you?" Sam asked. "Tell me everything."

Between them, James and Castan explained how their meeting with Jaxx went. Sam was particularly interested to hear of his many transport ships. James soon let Castan finish the recap, and he found himself staring out the window once again, only occasionally adding to the conversation in places.

James's mind was a mess. He couldn't begin to understand what having a Sacre Trigger Switch in his palm could mean. Maybe he wasn't the person everyone thought he was. If the old James was working for a criminal empire, what did that mean? He felt like he was a good and decent person, surely that meant he was inherently good? Could he have been on the wrong side, without even the people closest to him knowing?

A single thought ran through James: he would have to figure out who he once was on his own, rather than relying on other people to tell him. He would have to protect his own secrets.

They parked the craft in a side hanger bay of the Oneron Outpost. Their earlier welcome guide, Corporal Prosgo, was there to greet them.

"It's good to see you back, General Hawkings," the burly man said.

"Did Liana and Evan Goodheart return safely?" Sam asked as they walked through the corridors.

"They did, approximately an hour ago. You are to be debriefed once you are all met."

"Good to hear," Sam said.

James couldn't help but compare Sam and Prosgo. Both soldiers, but with a large difference in their personalities and countenance. Sam had never appeared the type to be a strict and rigid military man like Prosgo was. Or perhaps Sam had been gone from that life for so long that his discipline no longer showed. Liana did say that Sam had turned his back on all this, and wanted to forget about the military life.

They entered the large control room where they had met Jorak and Liana earlier. The raised platform in the centre was empty. They found Jorak to the side, overlooking a work station with a few soldiers.

It was then that James had a good look at the mech that ran along the circular track over the bank of consoles. From the cubed body, two mechanical arms with multiple bends extended down and moved around the consoles, inputting commands with dozens of finger joints. One of the arms protracted liked a telescope as they entered, reaching for a side workstation.

"Ah, they have returned," Jorak said. As he turned to them, he revealed an older man standing beside him. James gasped at the sight.

"Den!"

Den Keenosh's crooked smile was a welcomed surprise, and James couldn't help but laugh in the moment.

"How goes our hero?" Den said. His grey hair still had a dishevelled look, and the stubble on his squared jaw had grown a little since James saw him last. He hobbled closer, the metal brace on his leg impeding his steps, and extended a hand.

James shook it and said, "Better now. I wasn't sure if I'd see you again."

"Neither was I. But I decided to spend some time in this here outpost and get back into the loop of things."

"It's good to see you, General," Sam said, shaking Den's hand.

Den's other hand held a circular device that faced the ground, pressing down as if he were leaning on it. Then James realised Den *was* leaning on it. A faint blue light emanated from the underside of the device, keeping it hovering in place.

"So that's how you get about?" James asked.

Den gave a slight shrug. "The convenience of technology. I've always preferred it to a walking stick."

"Handy toy," Castan said beside them. "I had something like that to swing from when I was younger."

"This is Castan," Sam said, gesturing. "He helped us travel the dunes to Riondon, away from prying eyes. And was good enough to take the meeting with Higerio Jaxx with James."

"Den Keenosh," Den said, shaking Castan's hand. "Sounds like we all owe you a big thanks."

Castan raised his arms and shrugged sheepishly. "I do what I do. We're not all called heroes."

"Many heroes go unnoticed," Den said, in his wise and solemn way.

"Speaking of unnoticed," Sam said to Jorak. "Is Liana around?"

Jorak looked up from a monitor. "She's preparing our next briefing. Sounds like they had an eventful time at the iron forge."

Sam nodded.

"Den, what happened to you in Tyken Town?" James asked. "You said you had to leave the city?"

Den's piercing blue eyes regarded James. At once they soothed and energised him. The comforting sensation almost felt like coming home; which was a strange thought for James.

"I had to see an old friend just outside of town."

"About that," Sam said. "That came up."

James looked to Sam and then Den, whose eyes tensed slightly. "It came up?"

A moment of silence passed over them, with the soft beeping's and humming's of the room filling the gap.

"I think it's time we have a proper talk," James said. He pointed his head to a side door.

"You're quite right," Den said. "Let us."

"You fellas do what you have to do," Jorak said. He looked distracted between the monitors, some documents in his hand, and their conversation. "We'll be preparing a big dinner for tonight, and you're all welcome."

"Mighty kind of you to offer," Castan said, "but I have an all-expense paid night in the Guyshawk Hotel I don't intend on missing out on."

A smile crept on Jorak's stony face. "Very well. That is a hard offer to pass up."

"However," Castan said. "I do insist on helping prepare dinner. If you'll have me in your kitchens. One of my favourite things to do is work in someone else's kitchen. And it's the least I can do for all your hospitality."

"A fair request," Jorak said. "We'd be happy to have your services, I'm sure. Then you can go to your fancy hotel."

"Well, not that this place isn't lovely," Castan said. "I'm sure it can closely match the Guyshawk hotel's amenities. Just..."

"Not enough dancing girls here," Sam finished.

Castan's eyes widened while Jorak barked a laugh. He clapped Castan on the back. "You're welcome to anything we have here. Except for the women. Later we'll have someone fly you back to town."

Castan winced at the big slap, but smiled and nodded. "You're kind folk. I'm grateful."

Sam gestured to James and Den. "You go on ahead. I'll give Jorak a report of your meeting with Jaxx. Castan would you stay with us and fill in the blanks?"

There was a moment of what James guessed to be apprehension from Castan, before the Canarrian smiled and said, "Ofcourse, I will be happy to."

"Very good," Jorak said.

James nodded to Den and led the way to the side door. He saw the full use of Den's walking device as the old man pressed down on it; how the device remained in place as if pushed against the ground, while still moving freely when raised.

They entered the grey concrete room Liana had taken them to earlier. James guessed it was as good a room as any to talk. Dust motes sparkled in the bright shafts of light from the windows, and the air seemed hotter than it had before.

Den sat himself on the edge of the long curved sofa, and James sat on the far end, which allowed him to almost face Den. He didn't want to be too close for this talk.

"You've come a long way in just a few days," Den said to James once he had settled into the chair, his braced leg stretched out. "I can see that."

"You weren't quite straight with me," James said. "When we first met. Maybe you thought I couldn't handle it then, but I can. I've had time to process things."

"You're right." Den said. "Would you catch me up with what you know?"

"Sam told me about the Dalgredda Valley Attack. And of the spell over Tyken Town that made me easy to forget. And that my memories will never return."

Den nodded slowly. "There was a lot to tell you, James, and we only did what he thought we should have done, given the circumstances."

"How about you just tell me everything?" James said. "And we'll go from there."

Den nodded again. "Indeed. That friend of mine, Zadho Emassidhae Zedoen, has a great many abilities. He formulated the spell that kept you hidden. But when that beggar somehow noticed you, it must have temporarily nullified the spell. And it allowed the Dark Sorcerer, who had been keeping an eye out for your presence in the galaxy, to finally see you."

"This Zhado is who you went to see?" James asked.

"I had to see him and find out how you were recognised. Zadho was certainly surprised, although he had felt that someone had broken through his spell and was already trying to determine why. What we found was that the beggar's troubled and broken mind somehow allowed him to exclude himself from the effects of the spell. We gather that the man must have truly known you previously, but we can't say from where."

James felt the familiar throbbing in his temple when thinking about the beggar he had accidentally killed. His throat was tight when he said, "He called me a prince."