

Chapter Five - Enemies In The Shadows - Part Two

After some time, the gap opened up to a larger room. They rounded a wall of rock and came to a wide open cavern. The area was lined with rows of pillars that reached the high ceiling.

The flames in Sam's hand were brighter and whiter than the flaming wood had been. They gave off more light, with less flames or heat. James found it fascinating to see fire rising from a palm like that. Remembering what Sam had said earlier about having to focus when channelling an open flame, James wondered how taxing it was for him to maintain the fire.

"It must not have been easy to part with such a treasured possession," Sam said to Evan. "Thank you. We owe you a great deal."

Evan gave no discernible expression. "There was no choice, in my mind. We had to learn the way out. That earth was the only link I had to my home, but, greater needs..." He looked away as his voice trailed off.

"You'll return home someday," James said carefully, hoping to please Evan. "Once we learn more about the Arbiter who overthrew your kingdom, we'll help you restore peace to your land." He couldn't believe the words he spoke—they sounded so foreign to him, like something out of a fairy tale. And he had no idea how they would go about finding more on the unknown man who was responsible for taking over Evan's homeland. But he was trying to make amends with Evan.

"I will return to my home once again, and reclaim all the earth it possesses," Evan said, without meeting James's eyes.

James frowned at the lack of warmth in Evan's voice.

"I would settle for any kind of earth," Sam said. "As long as it's outside."

They came to a pool of shimmering water in the dipped centre of the room, perhaps a few inches deep.

Sam lifted his hand in as they approached the rock pillars, illuminating the edges of the cavern. Shadows danced around them, giving the impression of movement.

A howling cry cut through the silence, seeming to come from all around. It was followed by a screeching wail that grew louder as it approached, bursting into the room and echoing off the walls.

James tensed, having heard those sounds before. His hand shook as he reached for his knife.

"Stay alert," Sam said.

"Anyone else beginning to think that the talking plant sent us the wrong way?" James asked.

At the other end of the room, the ground rose into a wide tunnel, leading up to a faint light. The ramp ascended out of view, but James was sure that daylight was at its top.

"Well if he did, he also sent us to a way out," Sam said.

A way out to where, though? *James thought.*

Sam extinguished the flame in his hand and drew his sword. The weak light from the far tunnel shone off the glimmering water, though shadows were all around them. The surrounding darkness was far too close, concealing far too much.

The swish of steel on wood told James that Evan had also drawn his great sword, and he turned to see the Voarn's large eyes shining in the darkness. James withdrew his new knife, glancing at the long, curved blade. It felt heavier and sharper than his last knife, very solid, and he tried to take comfort in its higher quality.

They cautiously moved between the pillars, their feet splashing in the shallow pool. The cold water caressed James's toes through his sandals, and also stung the small scratches and irritations he had accumulated. He tested his scratched shoulder again and felt a faint throbbing from the movement - Sam's healing magic must have been wearing off - although it was mostly still pain-free.

A growling howl came from above them. A large shadow fell through the darkness. It landed in the water with a heavy splash, raising its long spiked arms and spreading its clawed hands menacingly, standing at least eight feet tall. In an instant the towering shadow charged at them, cutting through the water with great speed.

Sam met the grillock in a clash of blade and claws. He blocked the reaching hands and pushed the tall creature back. When the grillock lunged at him again, Sam cut it across the chest and again in the back as it fell past him and splashed in the shallow water.

A second beast came out of the darkness beside Evan. The Voarn spun and sliced off a reaching claw. A second attack cut it across the body. The grillock fell with a groan, spilling dark blood that coloured the murky water.

Several more screeching wails echoed around them. Something heavy hit the water behind them, and another to the side. Another large shadow jumped from pillar to pillar above them.

Splashes came from behind James. He turned and saw a large shadow sprinting towards him. He twisted his body away from the charging grillock, sending it head first into a nearby pillar. He stared wide-eyed, surprised at having dealt with the creature so well, before he forced himself to focus and prepare for the next attack.

"Evan?" Sam called out, slashing at the air to fight back two approaching grillocks.

James scanned the dark cavern, but could not see Evan anywhere among the fast moving shadows.

Sam hacked at a reaching hand, and the grillock snapped its bloodied arm back with a hiss. A third shadow jumped off a pillar and landed behind Sam, who turned and sliced it across the chest. The other two charged at him. In a flurry of strikes Sam cut one down, spun and caught the second across the back and lopped off its arm, before evading a claw and beheading the third grillock. The three bodies fell into the dark water.

Sam ignited a flame in his hand and held it up. "Evan?" he called again. The light only served to illuminate the glistening pillars and dozen or so beasts all around them. James momentarily froze at the sight of all the grillocks surrounding them.

Another beast charged at Sam, who grabbed its head with his flaming hand. The area darkened immediately, highlighting the illuminated head of the grillock in Sam's hand. He lifted the beast up and slammed its head on the ground, splashing the water. The flames remained as he came off the beast, both on its face and on his hand.

A growling grillock headed towards James. Jagged spikes protruded from its long arms and around its wide shouldered torso, its hideous shape rim-lit by the fire behind it. James tensed and raised his knife in front of him. As the claws of the beast shot out, a large blade came down and tore its shoulder from its body in a bloody extraction.

Blood splattered onto James and he jumped back. The remains of the grillock dropped to the water, revealing the wet and bloodied form of Evan behind it, sword in hand.

Evan gave James a quick nod before darting off into a group of beasts.

High-pitched shrieks joined the echoing howls. James looked up to see smaller shadows moving among the pillars, jumping between them and scuttling down. Smaller grillocks, what James thought looked like shadow babies, darted through the cavern, squealing and yelping. He almost covered his ears from the piercing shrieks.

Several of the shadow babies jumped off the pillars and rained down on Sam and Evan. Evan called out and slammed his palm to the ground. A shockwave blasted out from the impact, sending the shadow babies flying away with the waves of water.

A great weight fell on James as one of the smaller shadows landed on his back. Sharp nails dug into his neck and he cried out. He grabbed the small hands, peeling them away, and managed to throw the creature over his head. The small grillock twisted in the air, caught a pillar and spiralled upwards into the darkness in a fluid motion. James felt the back of his neck, his hand coming back with blood.

The falling shadow creatures, the imposing darkness and the echoing howls overwhelmed James. His eyes darted around the cavern, holding his knife close, but it all became too much for him and his legs held in place, too weak to move. It looked as though the dark itself was coming alive all around them.

He turned to see several grillocks surrounding Sam. As Sam fended off the beast in front of him, another came from behind him. James tried to call out to Sam, who didn't see the approaching beast, but found no voice in him. James froze, mouth open and eyes wide, as the grillock grabbed Sam from behind and sank its teeth into his shoulder.

Sam cried out, struggling with the grillock. Blood pooled over his shoulder and down his shirt. Other grillocks closed in on him. James remained numb, held in place by a crippling fear.

Sam cried out again as he dropped his sword and fell to the water. A grillock struck out, and Sam's satchel was ripped from him, thrown to the ground with a clawed hand. Several grillocks surrounded him, horrifying shadows that closed in and covered him from view.

Evan appeared in a flash. He stabbed one grillock in the back and then decapitated a second, before jumping and beheading another. The final beast charged into him, almost knocking him off his feet, but Evan turned in the air and swung his sword out. The blade tore through the beast's chest as Evan caught his footing and steadied himself.

James's shoulders sagged with relief, though regret tightened his chest. He remained standing there, hating himself, as Evan went to Sam. Blood covered Sam's shoulder and arm and most of his chest. He faltered as Evan helped him up.

A dull shimmer caught James's eye, and he saw a wavering shadow falling towards him in the dark reflection of the water. He sprung to action, more out of surprise than intent. His swinging knife missed the grillock, which landed against him and pushed him to the ground. It loomed over him and stepped closer.

Something thudded into the water by James's hip. His grapple hook had fallen free. As the grillock stepped towards him with its arms raised, James snatched the grapple hook and pointed it towards the beast. He pressed the button on instinct. A three-pronged hook shot out, connected by a thick cord, and caught the approaching grillock in the chest. The impact knocked it off its feet and it fell back into the water with the hooks embedded in its chest.

James remained in the shallow water, surprised that the grapple hook had worked. He'd never used it before, and didn't even know if it still worked. He got to his feet and pulled the hook back, but it remained in the downed grillock's chest. He pressed the button on the handle again, and the hook snapped back in a sudden withdrawal that startled him.

"James. Evan," Sam called out as he felled a grillock. He now held his sword with one hand and stumbled between strikes. "Time to go!"

James looked around once more, panting heavily, and began running towards them. The area was mostly clear of grillocks, but several more large shadows had begun to drop from a higher wall, some scrambling down the pillars. James gave a thought to Sam's fallen satchel, but in the moment could not see it, nor could he afford to stop and search for it.

Near the exit ramp, a grillock came from the darkness on the side. It scrambled around the light shaft and charged towards them.

Then it came to James. The grillocks had so far stayed away from the shaft of sunlight. Maybe the light harmed them. Or they were afraid of it. This was their chance, he realised. They just needed to get into the light to be safe.

A shadow baby flew towards James and he backhanded it with his toughlet, keeping his pace. He was now desperate to get into the light. grillocks gathered behind them, splashing through the water.

Sam stopped near the tunnel and turned, urging Evan on and beckoning James. Evan pushed back an approaching grillock as he reached the ramp.

James came to the tunnel entrance, focused ahead and afraid to look back. The bright square of daylight at the top of the ramp was blinding. They were so close!

Two more grillocks came from the side, landing between James and the light shafts. He stumbled back, raising his knife. The shrill cries of the shadow babies came from the darkness behind him, getting closer.

Just get into the light, *James told himself.*

Sam came running past James and took on one of the grillocks. The other beast charged at James. He ducked and rolled, pushing himself across the ground and dove into the beam of light. He rolled to a stop, panting heavily. He turned to see a grillock approach him. It's inhuman form stepped into the light, revealing its slick black skin and highlighting its sharply pointed shoulder and torso protrusions. Horror struck James. They weren't afraid of the light. Behind the approaching grillock, dozens more shadows moved within the darkness, writhing like a black wave of roaring beasts.

Evan was farther up the ramp, his sword raised.

"Run," Sam called out. "Go. Get out."

Evan ran his sword through the nearest grillock and then turned into the light, heading up the ramp.

James pushed himself to his feet. It was hopeless. If the grillocks could enter the daylight then there was no chance of out running them. There was nowhere for them to go.

Sam came into the light, a backhand swing beheaded a grillock. The swing sent him stumbling. Fatigue was overwhelming him. His right arm hung limply under his injured shoulder.

James was stepping back, not knowing what else to do. Within seconds the would be surrounded. The first grillocks cleared the shaft of light and began scrambling up the ramp.

Sam sheathed his sword and raised an arm. With great effort he lifted his bloodied arm also. He shouted in a language James did not recognise and threw his arms forward. A torrent of gushing flames burst forth that cut through the air. James's breath caught as an intense hot air blasted through the tunnel.

The nearest grillocks were caught in the flames as Sam moved his arms across the cavern. Shrieks and tortured cries called out from behind the spout of flames. Sam's dark silhouette finally released the bright flames, and he collapsed. A wall of fire remained across the tunnel opening.

James ran back down to Sam, fighting against the heat of the flames. He curled Sam's arm over his shoulder and pushed them both up the ramp. Sam's sweaty head dropped and hung limply. James faltered as Sam's entire body sagged. He was unconscious. James lifted him with both hands and continued up the ramp, though his legs burned and his head throbbed. The shrill cries of the grillocks echoed behind the flames.

Evan waited for them at the top, his dark shape stained against the bright daylight. He helped James with Sam when they reached him, and they ran out into the harsh light of day.

1. This was a big chapter, but they're out of the caves at least! How was the big fight scene with the horde of grillocks for you? Did you get any tension or terror from it? Or mostly feel like you wanted it to be over with?
2. What did you think of the three characters together? We get more used to them from here on out, but did you get much of a sense of anything from them in the short time they've been together?
3. Anything else stand out for you? Good or bad? Any sections you felt like skipping?