

Chapter Forty: A Second Chance

Echoing boot steps and low murmurs from beyond the walls whispered through the quiet barracks. Sam stood by his bunk, looking down at the closed crate on his bed. It felt like he'd been standing there for an age, the world and everything in it fading out of existence. The contents called to him.

As much as it had pained him to give away his possessions two years earlier, he had never wanted to see them again. He had no intention of going back to the person he once was. And now, despite his resistance, he had become that person again without realising it. And he needed to stay that way. The final pieces were to collect his sword and grapple hook.

The First Fire Wars felt like someone else's past. Vivid flashes of memories and emotions that, while faded over time, were still powerful wounds that gripped Sam. That's how he saw himself, sometimes: as a wounded animal. Bleeding out, until it was time to be put down. But a lot had changed recently. He now had people he cared for again; that he needed to protect. He needed to fight at his very best. He needed to be the man he once was.

Sam leaned down, his hands carefully moving, and lifted the long crate lid. A twist of pain came from his torso, and he had to remind himself to keep his actions small while his injuries healed.

The familiar curved sword's dark-blue and silver facets still gleamed. The blade was wide at the hilt, tapering up to a sharp point, and curved and bent like a winding river. It had a more rounded, pyramidal shape than a usual flat blade. But then this sword, that had once belonged to a Hovagkai hunter demon, was not a traditional weapon.

Sam picked up the long hilt and held the sword up. Its multi-faceted edges caught the light in various shades. His heart raced at the familiarity of it, and how natural the handle felt in his grip. He welled with emotion, his throat seizing up. His brother's youthful laugh echoed in the air, as real as if he were there right then. Holding the sword that had taken his brother from him stirred a deep, dark sadness within him.

"That is quite the weapon," Evan said.

Sam turned to see him carefully approaching, with his hands behind his back. Evan now wore a dark-green combat suit, similar to the blue uniforms of the Oneron. The shoulders and chest were padded like the uniforms, with the same reinforced protective material that could absorb light impacts. It looked odd on him; more form fitting, and made him look smaller, somehow. His silver boots – the only item from his previous outfit - made no sound on the hard floor.

"This is a Demos Blood Diamond sword," Sam said, finding his voice heavy. He left it at that.

Evan quietly stepped closer. The side of his face still showed the faint mark of a large bruise. "Sam. Are you aware there is a soul inside the sword?"

Sam paused. He nodded slowly, and remained silent.

Evan came to a stop before him. "It is a very special blade. I could see that from beyond this room."

Sam regarded Evan, trying to read his youthful features.

"You know, Sam," Evan said. "You and I have not had a chance to talk much, on our own. We do not know each other very well. And yet, I believe there must be an open and honest understanding between us, if we are to work together as best we can."

Sam gave a slight nod. "I agree."

Evan held a severe look, his eyes hardening. A long moment of silence passed between them, making Sam wonder if he was expected to say something next, before Evan finally spoke. "Where I come from, we have a small insect called a Spira Spark. It is a rare bug that, if caught and cared for, would turn into a mighty Wind Stalker. And the Wind Stalker would prove that the gods favour the household which cared for it, and bring fortune and health. I caught one of these bugs, once, with a very dear friend of mine. And when that friend became very sick, I kept the Spira in a jar by her bedside. And it did not change into a Wind Stalker. It remained as it was."

"What did it mean if it didn't change?" Sam asked.

"It was considered a very bad omen. I took it to mean that the gods did not look over my dear friend. And she died sometime later." Evan paused to clear his throat, and Sam could see the torment in his eyes. "What I did not know at the time, was that a Spira Spark does not evolve into a Wind Stalker. It was a tale, told by adults to children. You see, adults would replace the bugs after a year or so, and tell their children that they had blessed their household. With the Spira beside my friend's sickbed, no one had thought to replace it. They were all too concerned with the real problem of her health and safety; not some childish belief that meant nothing."

When Evan paused again, Sam remained watching him carefully.

"Sometimes we are so concerned with things that do not matter," Evan said, "that we cannot see what is truly important."

A tightness had taken hold of Sam's chest. He tried to swallow but couldn't. "I'm sorry for your friend."

Evan with a slow, small nod, and a great deal of distress behind his large, shimmering eyes.

"A thought comes to me," Evan said. "Why would Jaxx take James? Did he intentionally want James? Or was it simply a case of taking a prisoner, and James had been closest? And then that brought another thought to me. One that has been with me for some time. Why did the Light Gods declare James Island the saviour of my people?"

Sam kept his expression carefully casual. "That's a far bigger question than I can answer. We've covered this already?"

"We have. Although the thing is, I know you are lying. And so, I find myself asking the same questions again. Why is James Island so special? I am trying to see what is truly important."

Sam placed his sword down on the bed and faced Evan. "I've noticed that trick of yours. How do you know what people are thinking?" When Evan remained silent, Sam added, "What happened to open and honest? That goes both ways, Evan."

They stared at each other for a moment in silence. Sam had to wonder if Evan could really be trusted with more information about James. In his experience, if he doubted someone, it was for the best. He could see Evan's shifting eyes were also considering what to say next.

"James is far stronger than he looks," Sam finally said. "He's proven that enough times."

"I agree. I see that now."

"Both Den and I have said before, only James can prove why he was chosen by the gods."

"But you have your theories."

Sam shrugged. "As much as any of us can guess."

Evan shook his head with a look of disappointment. He appeared troubled. "I never did tell you what happened when I healed James's burned hand. There were of course some issues with his first attempt at conjuring sorcery."

"What do you want to tell me, Evan?" Sam said curtly, growing weary of him stepping around questions.

"I have vomited once before like that, and it was in the presence of a great god. From feeling the immense, unfathomable power of an entity beyond all of us. It took me some time to make the connection, but I believe that I did feel something very powerful, and very dark, when I connected to James's injury."

"That's interesting," Sam said. "Is there a chance you could be mistaken? Or that this power could have come from something other than James?"

Evan's eyes shifted in thought, and Sam saw there were other options he was holding back.

"I just wished for you to know," Evan eventually said. "And it is something to consider, moving forward."

Sam nodded in agreement. Evan had caught himself out, opening a line of questioning that he himself wasn't willing to go down.

Sam brought out his harness belt from the crate and began strapping it over him, trying to hide his winces from Evan.

"About what Higero Jaxx said," Evan said. "That there is a Sacre spy among us. What do you think of that?"

Sam finished with the strap, securing it over his shoulder, and turned to him. "He was lying, of course. Unless that trick of yours thinks otherwise?"

"It does. Jaxx was not lying. At least, he believed he was telling the truth. I cannot say what that means, exactly, but there was truth in his words. Somewhere."

Sam shook his head and shrugged acceptance. "I'll have Liana look into everyone here. If there's anything suspicious in their records, we'll find it."

Evan looked unconvinced.

"Liana can be trusted," Sam said sternly. He would have no one say otherwise. Despite her going against his wishes and telling James that he and him had been friends.

"And if Jaxx was referring to one of us?"

Sam paused. Anger flushed his cheeks as he glared at Evan. "I am *not* with Sacre, Evan. Now you tell me, am I lying?"

"I do not think so. However, I was thinking of our friend Castan. He seems quite intent on staying with us."

Sam considered that. Castan had shown his true desire earlier, and he had certainly been more than he appeared. A dark thought came to Sam. Had Castan been looking for something else in their belongings? Had he been caught out and made up a story of his debts? "It's a possibility. Castan isn't the usual type that Sacre recruit, but then maybe that's what makes him effective. I still say that Jaxx was lying. To get us to doubt each other and fight amongst ourselves."

Evan looked thoughtful. Sam reached back to collect his sword.

"There is no sheath?" Evan asked.

"Never had one for it," Sam said, sliding the sword into its holdings on his back. He grimaced as a surprisingly sharp jolt of pain shot through his side, causing his breath to

catch. His gunshot wound had been healed to a great degree, but his body still needed time to recover. Heavy wounds always maintained a certain amount of lingering damage that healing could not reach – which some considered psychological damage after an injury.

He noticed Evan staring at the sword with a strange, distracted look. It was a look that told Sam he was in his own world, lost in his thoughts. Like someone who was seeing or hearing things that others couldn't.

Sam thought he felt something in the air then. He couldn't quite place the sensation, but right then, he would have sworn the sword was both angry at having been kept away for so long, and relieved at being with him again. And, he wondered if Evan could feel that too.

Reaching back into the crate, Sam retrieved his old grapple hook. He smiled as his fingers ran over its grooves and sections. The item had saved his life countless of times. A long handle with a wide opening for the hook release, to unfamiliar eyes it may have looked like a strange flashlight, but was so much more. The thought of using it, of swinging through the air and wielding his sword again, seized his throat. A mix of exhilaration and dread.

A small item remained in the corner of the crate. Sam hesitated, having almost forgotten it was there. It was like looking back into the past. Small wooden eyes looked up at him, as if the figure had just turned to him. He picked up the mouse figurine and played his fingers over it, reliving another lifetime of memories. *The hawk that caught the mouse.*

He was smiling when he turned back to Evan, who had said something.

"A special gift?" Evan said.

Sam nodded, and felt his jaw clench. His memories of Dana would not be for Evan to explore. He closed his hand over the figure and said no more.

Light boot steps echoed through the long room. Sam looked up to see Liana approaching them, her steps slow and careful, like Evan's had been.

"There you are," she said with a soft, melancholic smile. "How are you both?"

Sam did not need any special gifts to read the relief on Liana's face. She held back most of her 'it's about time you saw sense' expression, and had a warm, comforting look instead.

Sam and Evan both nodded to her. As Liana met them, a familiar feeling charged the air that struck Sam. The imminence of battle. Now was the time to fight, to be strong. Everything else was cast aside.

"We're ready," Sam said to her. "What's the plan?"

"I have twenty-six soldiers ready to go. We don't have the resources for any more, and have no time for reinforcements to come from off-world. The Avancheon's support ship will be too little too late. I'll keep a small group nearby to watch over the civilians and make sure

the struggle doesn't spread into the town, and in case Jaxx or his men try to get away. We have reports of at least sixty guards left in the outpost, along with another forty employees, who may have combat experience. There're enough armaments in there to arm them all, at least."

"And if Jaxx has more men than we expect," Evan said. "Like last time?"

"He could be hiding his soldiers from our satellites. But I don't see how."

Evan turned to Sam. "Did you notice anything odd, during the battle? There were far more guards than it seemed there should be."

Sam cocked his head. "What do you mean?"

Evan seemed to consider his words before he said, "At one point I had thrown sorcery at a group of guards, and saw it pass directly through them, as though they were not there. And, I could not be sure of it, but I thought I saw some of the same guards. The same face, on two occasions."

"A lot can go on in a battle like that," Sam said. "We think we see things and feel things in the moment. It can be chaotic."

"You do not listen," Evan said. "Jaxx had more guards than he should have. He has somehow multiplied..." he paused, looking away thoughtfully.

"You're saying he's doubling his guards?" Liana said.

Evan shook his head, now looking doubtful. "I had been struck with Illusion sorcery, and saw many things that were not there. But when I broke through the illusion, for a moment I saw there were far fewer guards on the field. As though half of them had simply disappeared."

"That would explain why he had more guards than we estimated," Liana said. "I've already told my men to be aware of any possible Illusion magic, and I'll be sure to tell them about extra guards showing up. We can get by easier if we know which are real and which are distractions, if we can figure it out."

"The illusions are powerful," Evan said. "To the extent that it will feel as though they are inflicting real damage to us. Or they can distract us long enough for a real sword to find us."

"I don't like it," Sam said. "Fighting guards that aren't really there. But if we're aware of the effects of the illusions, it may go some way to help dampen or prevent their power. All we can do is be extra vigilant and focus on what we know to be true enemies."

It seemed possible that Jaxx – if he were so powerful with Illusion magic – could make it look like there were more guards attacking them. it would go some way to explain how they had managed to escape without all being killed.

Liana eyed them both. "Final decision. You're both sure you're ready to go back in?"

Evan's curt nod matched Sam's. There seemed to be no doubts between them.

"We will be ready for them, this time," Evan said. He glanced over them and added, "I will collect my sword, and meet you in the docking station."

"Five minutes," Liana said, smiling at him.

Evan nodded as he passed her, and headed out of the room.

Liana's smile widened when she looked back at Sam, her face softening with an inside joke. The look caused Sam to smile back and he almost chuckled in the moment. It felt like he was seeing his old friend again.

"He's off to say goodbye to Melida," Liana said playfully, stepping closer. "Maybe I should start keeping an eye on them two."

"Maybe you should have given him more than five minutes," Sam said.

Liana slapped him lightly on the arm. "Sam!"

Sam winced and smiled, rubbing his arm. They both laughed.

Liana's eyes went to the mouse figure in Sam's hand. "I remember that," she said softly. "Do you still keep in touch with Dana?"

Sam swallowed and shook his head. "Not for a long time."

He slid the figure in his pocket. Liana's eyes became sorrowful. He was glad she saw enough sense not to pursue the subject.

"Sam," she said, and her low voice told him what she would say next. "I'm sorry about James. I know I shouldn't have said anything about you two. But he can handle knowing about his past. He can."

"My uncle used to tell me that apologies with *but's* don't count," Sam said.

Liana gave him a crooked smile. "I know. But I'm sorry."

Sam had to smile back. He had forgotten how frustrating she could be; and at the same time, he couldn't deny how good it felt to be in her company again. Since he'd been in the outpost, he'd felt like there was a barrier between him and Liana. Something that went unsaid and held them both back, not quite knowing what to say to each other. Now it felt as though he had his old friend back; like they had passed through that barrier.

"I overreacted," he said. "You're probably right. Luckiana. I've already decided to tell James everything. We just need to get him back, first."

"I'm glad." Liana raised a hand to hover over his faintly scarred forehead. "You were such a mess when you came in. You know that? I didn't know what to think. Sam, are you sure you're good to go?" She slowly lowered her hand, her fingers reaching closer for moment as they passed down.

"I am," he said. *I have to be.*

"We shouldn't have underestimated Jaxx in the first place. We should have insisted on reinforcements from the Avancheon straight away. We should have made them understand the extent of the threat."

"Liana, it's not your fault. It's mine, for going without you. We'll go in together and get James, and Jaxx, and this'll be over with."

"Then clear skies and alibi's," she said with a sad smile.

Sam chuckled softly. "I haven't heard that in a long time." Since graduating from the academy.

Liana pulled him into a hug. Sam held her close, pressing a hand against her head. He breathed in her scented hair and warm skin. "I've missed you, Sam." Her voice was muffled against his neck, and for an instant it sounded younger, as if they were back in the academy. Back when they were closer.

They pulled away and looked at each other. Liana's eyes were thick and heavy, but she smiled.

"And it's good to see the Demos again," she said. "I was never a fan of Elleonor."

Sam's sword from Tyken Town had always been a temporary possession, a part of him knew. He would be sure it saw its way back to its creator, Aan Amos.

He rubbed her tanned arm, smiling, and then looked over the room. He was ready. When he turned back to her he paused, holding her gaze.

"Thanks, Li," he said quietly.

She smiled and nodded. Then she gestured behind her. "Let's go. We have a hero and a villain to collect."

Sam followed her out. The feel of his old sword against his back, his grapple hook dangling on his hip, and the mouse figure in his pocket, all burned with fierce memories, blurring the past with the present. He felt like two people as he walked; a combination that formed a

brand-new person. Like James, he would have to learn what kind of person his new self would be.