

## Chapter Two: Whispers In The Dark - Part Two

Sam looked up from studying the ground and eyed him questioningly.

"Just, anything," James said. "I'd rather talk than walk in silence and let my nerves get the better of me."

"Okay," Sam said. "How are you coping, with everything? Things happened pretty fast yesterday, and we haven't had much chance to talk."

James considered this and said, "You know, I haven't really had a chance to think about anything too much. Since leaving Tyken Town. I was too exhausted earlier to do anything but fall straight to sleep. Now... now I'm just worried about Evan."

Sam regarded him with a small smile. "I'm impressed, James. The only life you've ever known has been blown apart and all the walls of your comfort and safety been torn down, your future a complete unknown, and here you are worrying about someone you've known for less than a day."

"That's the thing," James said. "I have no world. Not really. So there isn't one to turn upside down. It's hard to feel the chaos within the chaos, if you get me. But I'm hopeful. About the future, our situation..."

A faint rumble echoed through the cave tunnel, which sounded to James like a low growl. He shuddered to think what kind of creature could make that sound. "Well, maybe not our *current* situation, anyway," he added, realising his nerves had quickened his speech.

Sam nodded, keeping his focus ahead.

James kicked something solid. He searched the ground and saw crumpled armour plating and scattered mechanical parts, gleaming dully in the firelight. What looked like oil stains, or could have been blood, was splattered on the walls and ground. *Meth fend*, James thought. *It looks like a mech was blasted apart here. Or torn apart.*

James hoped Evan wasn't waiting for them somewhere in a pool of his own blood. He shook the dark thoughts away with a shudder. The tunnel had narrowed and felt too close, too constricting, like the cave was slowly swallowing them up.

"Can you just tell me, what your plan was for me?" James asked.

Sam had been posing as a construction worker in Tyken Town, and for two years James had worked alongside him. That was until Sam revealed himself to be an Oneron soldier, and told James he was one too. Now he felt like he was just beginning to meet Sam, the real Sam, for the first time.

"It was simple," Sam said. "Tam, Den and I were to watch over you, allow you to live out your new life in town, and make sure nothing bad happened to you. We were to keep a relative distance."

"Right," James said. "That you did. Tam was the only one that actually spoke to me. But then, he was our foreman so that was his job." But it was more than that. James considered Tam his only friend, and he truly felt that Tam cared for him. When James had awoken those two years earlier, he had spent several days living on the streets, coming to terms with his sudden existence. It had been a chance encounter - which in hindsight wasn't so random - with Tam that had led the man to employ James, and help him get settled with a home of his own.

James turned to Sam. "You never said two words to me if you could help it."

"I know," Sam said softly. "I'm sorry for that. I didn't know how close I could get, and I guess, I stayed too far back."

"It's not that you weren't friendly. But..." *but I could have used another friend.* James let the thought linger as a lump grew in his throat. He shook his head and added, "And I didn't even know that Den existed until yesterday."

Den Keenosh, the Oneron General, had been the one that actually revealed James's true identity to him. Yesterday had proven to be the day that James was meant to be told everything. Tam had asked James to delivery a package to a special client, and that client had been the old man with the piercing blue eyes, Den Keenosh. And the package had been James's father's grapple hook, and a photo of two soldiers, both of whom may have connections to his father.

Yesterday was the day that Den and Sam had to come clean to James, because of what James did the day before. A violent shudder gripped him as he tried to shake away the thought of what he had done.

"We all had your best interests at heart, though," Sam said, his brows tensing with sincerity. "I hope you can understand that."

James was silent for a time, before he said, "I know you all believed you were doing what was best for me. But I should have been told the truth from the start."

Sam nodded solemnly, his face half in shadows in the wavering firelight.

James sighed, fighting through the maelstrom of thoughts and questions in his head. "I just want to know everything. Like... I was a soldier before. So how come whenever I'm faced with an attacker, my legs turn to wet sand?"

Sam stifled a smile. "You're far more capable than you believe yourself to be. The body is a powerful machine, and remembers well. Your experiences and training may have left your mind, but not your muscles."

"Right. I'll just have to remember that I'm a super soldier the next time I'm in a fight."

"You'll be fine, James," Sam said, clapping him on the back of the shoulder. "I'll make sure of that. And once we find Evan, you'll have two people to train you back to fighting form."

The tunnel narrowed ahead and they walked closer together. The heat from the flaming wood stifled the air around them.

James's mind flowed with questions. "Where am I from? What planet?" He had read many books on systems and planets, and developed an idea of the surrounding areas. Part of why James wanted to read so much - apart from learning more about the galaxy out there so he wouldn't feel so insecure about his lack of personal knowledge - was that he had always hoped that something would ring a bell. That he'd read something that would trigger a memory. But so far nothing had.

"Your homeworld is Caplia, in the Centrepont of the galaxy. So you may understand some Mealais, the main language on Caplia, if you heard some." Sam tensed suddenly, his voice hardening as he let out a harsh sigh. "No. You wouldn't understand it. You wouldn't recognise the language of your homeworld. No personal memories. No..." his throat caught and he turned away.

"Blight, James," Sam added grimly, shaking his head. "What did they do to you?"

"That's what you won't tell me," James said. "Den didn't fully explain what happened to me. How I lost everything. You said you'd tell me later." James left the question in the silent air. He soon added, more earnestly, "I have to know, Sam."

Sam's sombre eyes met his. "I know. But that's not a story for a place like this." James opened his mouth to speak, but Sam quickly added, "I promise, James. I will tell you, everything. Just not here. Not now."

James suppressed his sigh.

The firelight reflected in Sam's eyes and lined his troubled face. "I'm sorry," Sam said. "I didn't mean to bring it up. It's just... as much as I've had time to adjust to your circumstances, talking with you about it is still new to me."

Sam came to a stop. He bent down and ran a hand over the dirt, frowning thoughtfully.

"Anything?" James asked. "Evan?"

After a moment Sam said, "Possibly." He searched the ground nearby, moving the firelight over the area. "There," he said, and strode forward.

"What is it?" James asked, quickly following. He soon saw what Sam had seen.

They came to an object in the dirt. A metal canister that had been broken in two pieces. Evan's water cannister.

James swallowed, his pulse rising. He looked up and down the tunnel, as if doing so would tell him where Evan was.

"Hard to say what did this," Sam said, picking up a piece of the canister. "Something sharp and strong."

"You think he's okay?" James asked, afraid of what answer Sam would give.

"I think," Sam said, dropping the metal piece and standing, "that he's in here somewhere waiting for us to find him."

Sam gestured ahead and they continued walking. The air had grown heavier, the heat causing James to sweat. He looked behind them and saw a disconcerting darkness. It felt as though they had become lost in another world.

James tried to keep the image of Evan lying in his own blood out of his head. Evan was a very competent fighter, and had a sword that was bigger than any James had ever seen. Plus he was probably the strongest magic user James had come across.

Sam turned to him. "Come on. You must have more questions."

James frowned, wondering how Sam could sound so care-free, like they were just out for a stroll. Then he realised that Sam was goading him to speak more, in an effort to help ease the tension of the moment. At first James shook his head, finding it hard to think about anything other than Evan. Then he realised there was one burning question he had been desperate to ask.

"Will my memories ever come back?"

It took Sam a long, troubling moment to answer. "I was told that your memory loss—a side effect of the magic that healed you—was permanent." Seeing James's distraught face, Sam quickly continued. "I've seen enough in this life to know that anything is possible, so we can't rule anything out. But from what I understand, if there ever was a way to return your memories, the healing would be reversed also."

"Meaning I would die." James's voice sounded miles away. A numbing chill ran through him. He was told he had been on the verge of death, and the healing spell that brought him back had resulted in his memory loss. The realisation that he would never be the person he once was brought an overwhelming daze that skewed the caves and caused him to steady himself.

Sam turned to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. "Nothing is definite. We may still find a way."

"But it's fairly certain that I'll never get my memories back?"

"I don't know what to tell you, James. It sounded certain when I was told of the events. But I know enough to know that anything can be possible."

"So you weren't there? You don't know..."

"No, I wasn't there when it happened," Sam said.

"Who told you?"

"Your father."

James's throat caught. "You knew him?"

"Not well. I'd met him a few times."

James's hand had gone to the grapple hook on his belt. He would have liked to think that having it would make him feel closer to his missing father, but he didn't have memories like that. The grapple hook just felt like some strange object of a different world. As did the idea of having a father.

Ahead, the tunnel spilt into two smaller tunnels side by side, both entrances curving away into darkness.

Sam must have spotted something. He increased his pace and knelt by the left side tunnel.

Through the firelight James could see that the grainy dirt had been disturbed. It took him a moment to realise the indentation was a boot mark.

"Evan's prints," Sam said, his eyes roaming the ground. He shifted towards the right side tunnel, holding the fire forward.

Other marks in the dirt looked about three times the size of Evan's boot print. The larger prints had four long digits with a fifth smaller digit to the side. Scratches in the dirt told James that the feet were clawed.

Sam's serious eyes told James what he feared.

"Grillocks," James said. "That's what those prints are. Right?"

"Following Evan," Sam said grimly.

"How do you know they were following him?"

"See this one here," Sam said. "The grillock's print overlaps Evan's. Evan turned into this tunnel, not too long ago, likely. And two, maybe three of them, followed him in."

Sam's expression was dark and troubled when he said, "We should hurry, and be on our guard." He gestured and they entered the left tunnel, on the trail of Evan.

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So what do you think about James and Sam so far?

How is the story starting out for you?

Everything mostly understandable and clear?

Lots more will open up as we go through these opening chapters.