

Chapter Eighteen: Unsettled Business - Part Two

Clashing swords rang in the air as Audlin blocked Evan's attack. Sam ran for Evan but the three Mukk's came to him with their weapons swinging. Sam darted between them, twisting and striking against their attacks.

As combatants shifted and weapons collided, James faced the dark-skinned man. He held the knives in a backwards grip, allowing the rope attached on each end to unspool in front of him. A short crop of dark hair ran down his head and joined a thin, pointed beard that rounded his thin lips. His pocked-skin was wrinkled and cracked, though he did not look old.

James drew his sword, having to pull the front of his desert cloak under his arms to allow them to move more freely. He assumed a battle stance and gulped a breath.

Likely sensing James's apprehension, the man scoffed.

"You know how to use that thing?" He asked in a slow and menacing drawl. His foreign accent sounded very off-world.

The accusation offended James—a reaction that surprised even him—and a rush of determination spurred him on as he stepped forward. He would show him. He'd show them all.

A knife flew from the man's hand. It rotated back from the pull of the rope and he twisted and let loose the other knife, spinning them both around him. James stayed back, seeing no way past the flying knives. The fluid motions of the spiralling knives would have been impressive if they weren't the prelude to an impending attack.

The man flung an arm out and a knife flew forward. With a heartbeat to react, James jerked to the side and the knife flew passed him. It held in the air by his turned face as the rope became taught, before being snatched back towards the man.

Thinking that the man would be less lethal at close range, James closed the distance between them, raising his sword. A fire burned in him, wanting to show that he wasn't weak. That he could handle himself in a fight.

His blade swung through empty air as the man dodged to the side. James followed with a backhanded attack but the man moved in a blur and came to his other side. A knife sprung up, the tip just missing James's arm as he jumped back.

A wall of heat blasted over them, pausing their actions. Over the man's shoulder, James saw that Sam had knocked one of the Mukks down with a fist engulfed in flames. Sam swung his sword out at the other two Mukks, and in turn threw out his flaming hand in a combination of attacks. They blocked each attack with their staffs, but one of them missed a quick jab

that followed a sword swing. Sam stumbled back to avoid the next attack, almost falling back on himself before he found his footing.

Sam fought well but he was slower than James had seen him move before. James would have to keep an eye on Sam, who was likely still a lot weaker than he was letting on.

Mousslo's yelped and whinnied from their stalls, stomping in agitation.

Away to the side, Evan and Audlin circled each other, their swords raised.

The dark-skinned man's feet shifted and his knives once again spun in an impressive display, the rope catching on his elbows as he spun and expertly worked the knives around him.

"This be quick work," he said to James. His voice was steady and calm, despite his actions.

James lunged and jabbed his sword forward. The man easily side-stepped and brought his knife up, catching James's forearm. James jumped back in shock as pain seared through his arm. The cut was shallow, no more than a thin red line across his arm, but it stung like hell. He cursed himself for attempting an attack that Sam had not taught him, and composed himself, though his sword grip was considerably weaker now.

"First blood. First kill," the dark-skinned man said, his lips curled up in a sneer.

The knives flew around him once again. The man raised a leg as a knife curved under him, before jumping up and spinning in a blur of motion. From his spiralling momentum, a knife suddenly shot out. James's blade clanged against the darting knife and sent it thudding to the ground.

A heavy breath left James, elated at having blocked the attack. But a second knife soared towards him. Quickly ducking, his legs buckled under him as the knife blew over his hair. James retreated, realising that the stalls were behind him, and he did not have much ground to move around.

"Lucky block," the man said, reeling both knives into his hands.

Sweat dripped from James's brow as he gripped his sword tight, trying to ignore the pain in his forearm.

A crack of lightning ignited in the air. Across the street, Audlin's sword released a blast of electricity that struck the ground by Evan. The Voarn had dived to the side and avoided the strike, then charged with his own attacks. Sam shot down from above and struck his knee into the face of one of the Mukks, and then stumbled as he landed, falling to a knee and catching himself.

James perked up and ran towards Sam, but a knife flew by him and caused him to scramble back. The dark-skinned man threw a second knife up and then swung the blade down in a

wide arc. James jumped back as the knife dug into the ground by his feet, and he found himself soaring into the air. The force had pushed him higher than he intended and he flailed in the air. He landed on the ridged roof of the stalls. The metal roof creaked and dented under his weight, but held firm. James met his opponent's stunned look, his own eyes wide with surprise. Having cleared over a dozen feet, he took the moment to catch his breath and steady his nerves, now at a safe distance from the man's attacks.

With an overview of the battle, James checked on his companions. Sam was blocking successive attacks from the largest of the Mukks. One of the reptile men was downed, a pool of blood gathering under him. Sam flipped over the large Mukk, planted his feet on his back, and pushed off. He flew through the air and swiped his sword at the hammer Mukk.

Another crack of lightning shot from Audlin's sword as Evan lunged towards him, dodging the blast and readying his sword. Evan's heavy breaths and sharp cries accompanied each of his heavy strikes.

The dark-skinned man grunted. "Stay and crow with rest of chickens on roofs." He turned and approached the other combatants.

A pang of guilt hit James for remaining on the roof, but he told himself he was waiting for the right moment to strike again.

Audlin called out to Evan as they circled each other. "What's wrong, short-step? Afraid to use the sceptre?"

Evan responded with a flurry of sword strikes which pushed Audlin back. The hunter's sword sparked with electricity as it struck Evan's sword, throwing out brilliant flashes of light.

James realised Audlin was right. It seemed as though Evan was hesitant to use the sceptre. He hadn't even thrown any sorcery in the fight. Maybe he was worried about channelling his magic while the sceptre was on him.

"Couldn't handle such power, anyhow," Audlin jeered.

Evan planted his feet and swung a powerful blow with a harsh cry. Audlin blocked with his charged sword but the impact sent him flying backwards. He landed on his back and slid through the dirt before coming to a stop.

Evan took a step towards the fallen hunter.

From his vantage point, James saw Audlin rise onto a knee, keeping his back to Evan. Audlin had a small, mechanical pistol in his hand. Attached along the top of the pistol was a stubby dart. James called out a warning as Audlin turned and pointed the pistol at Evan, but it was too late. The dart shot through the air and caught Evan in the neck. The Voarn hesitated a moment, before he teetered and dropped to the ground, throwing up a cloud of dirt.

James yelled out in frustration. Evan's still body remained on the ground.

The sight must have startled Sam, as he had turned and paused. The swinging hammer caught him hard in the chest and flung him across the street. He rolled into a heap on the dusty earth and came to a stop against a collection of crates.

James's stomach dropped. Sam lay on the ground, motionless. James cursed himself. He should have stuck closer to Sam and watched out for him. But instead he was hiding on this rooftop. Sam had been hurt again because James hadn't been there for him.

Two of the Mukk's were down, one groaning in pain, the other bleeding out. The hammer Mukk fell to a knee with a hand to his side. Sam must have caught him before he was struck with the hammer.

That just left Audlin and the dark-skinned man. Both of them approached Evan.

James summoned his strength and jumped. He aimed low and shot in a straight line towards them, his desert cloak flared out behind him. The rush of wind through him spurred him on, and he readied his sword in the air.

The singing of flying metal came up to James, and he saw a knife darting towards him. He swung out with a grunt, spinning in the air and deflecting the knife, sending it hurtling back towards its owner. The blade came down and plunged into the man's thigh. He cried out in pain as James landed and broke into a run towards Audlin.

The hunter stood over Evan, but turned towards James as he approached. James swung his sword out, attacking with the three-strike combination Sam had taught him. Audlin managed to block with his sword, throwing out flashes of blue light from each strike, but the force pushed him back.

Spurred on by the momentum, James struck out in a furious succession of swings, no longer thinking of his actions but going along with them. Audlin's silhouette was dark against the brilliant flashes of light from his electrified sword. One strike sent out a tendril of lightning that licked James's arm and he jolted back, gritting his teeth against the shocking pain.

Audlin's feet caught and he stumbled back, before he lost his footing and fell down. His sword clattered away from him, scorching the dusty ground.

James stepped toward Audlin, who scrambled back through the dirt.

"Whoa, whoa," Audlin said, raising a hand. "Listen here, now."

James's heart raced, his shoulders heaving. He raised his sword and considered his next attack. Could he kill a man, just like that? Maybe he would spare him. First he had to check on Sam and Evan.

A stabbing pain exploded in James's side. He teetered and stumbled sideways, dropping his sword as his strength left him. He looked down to see a knife embedded in his side. He jerked back when the knife yanked free, sending out a fresh burst of burning pain through his side. He fell to a knee with harsh, short breaths.

The dark-skinned man retracted his bloodied knife as he approached James.

Through watery eyes, James turned and saw that Sam remained on the ground farther away. The hammer Mukk was up again, stepped towards Sam with his weapon raised.

Blood seeped through James's side, staining his desert cloak. He panted heavily, sweat dripping into his eyes. Audlin stood up and came towards him. The dark-skinned man approached from the other side, and they both stood over him.

Behind them, Evan remained lifeless in the dirt.

James grimaced and gritted his teeth. He dropped his head, defeated. It hurt too much to stand and it took all his strength just to rise onto his knees.

"You'll be the first to go," Audlin said. "Then your flaming friend. Leaving the lengki to me and mine." He shook his head, appearing genuinely saddened. "You could have just taken the gold and avoided all this."

Audlin raised the sword over his head, preparing a killing blow. The blade had a long gap running along its centre, where the charges of electricity came out from. James tightened his grip on his sword, determined not to die there in the dirt. The dark-skinned man raised his knives.

A burst of light came over them all as Audlin swung down and James threw himself up.