

Chapter Forty Five: Making Plans

Later that night, James walked through the corridors of the outpost on weak legs. His head felt heavy and his muscles ached, but he had found enough strength in him to walk, having grown restless in his sickbed. He came into the study and saw Liana, Jorak and Den there.

James still couldn't believe he was alive. If that great, dark explosion hadn't killed him, then he should have surely bled to death from his injuries. But he was very glad to see those familiar faces once again.

"Good to see you up, son," Jorak said. He came away from the small bar area and handed James a glass with something dark inside. "Whiskey-infused Sagka," he added with a wink. "Best thing for you."

As James took the drink with a quiet thanks, he looked over his bare forearms. He saw the breaking of his toughlets as a sign for him to finally leave his old life behind. He was no longer an employee of Rimas Complete; no longer in construction. But then, he realised, he hadn't thought of himself in that way for a long while now. He had always been an Oneron soldier. He just had to remember that.

"Evan?" James asked, finding his voice hoarse.

"He's with Melida," Liana said. She stepped closer with her tablet resting in both hands in front of her. "He'll be leaving with the Avancheon ship that'll be arriving tomorrow."

"He's really leaving?" James asked. He knew this moment would come eventually, but it was hard to accept that Evan was leaving the planet and going back home. James had only known him for less than a week, but after everything they had been through together, in a way, Evan was perhaps the closest person to him.

"He is," Liana said, looking forlorn as she gave him a sad smile.

James wished he could have done more to help Evan with his homeland struggles, but he understood now he was not the man to help him. He still wondered if the Light Gods had really meant to name him as Evan's saviour. A thought struck him as he settled onto a large sofa chair.

The vision of the Dark Sorcerer had come from a blinding white light. Maybe that could have been the same kind of light from the Light Gods. Had those gods somehow sent James that vision of the Dark Sorcerer and that hellish world? Had they connected him with the Dark Sorcerer? His head hurt too much to think clearly on anything.

As Jorak sat beside Den and engaged him in a quiet conversation, Liana came over to James and sat on the large armrest of his chair. Her long hair hung loose down her shoulders, framing her face, and he caught a flowery scent as she settled beside him. As stunning as she was, James couldn't help but feel something was different now. He had seen another

side of Liana after she'd revealed he and Sam had been friends before. He couldn't place his unease, but he knew he didn't feel as close to her anymore. Or didn't want to be close to her. She'd been lying to him along with everyone else, and he couldn't trust her so much now, even if a part of him still wanted to.

"You should be in bed," she told him.

"I'm fine. Feeling better already."

"Well, you still look like hell. But it's good to see you up." She looked away as she paused, looking somewhat troubled, and then turned back to him. "If you need anything... I mean, if there's anything you want to talk about; about your old life, anything at all, I want you to know you can come to me at any time. Sam has decided that he'll tell you everything. And I want to also. And, we can train together again whenever you're ready for it. You're a good student."

James gave her a small smile. Even with his apprehensions, he was glad to have her in his life. She could teach him a lot about being a soldier. And despite his doubts about trusting her, he felt she had a good heart.

He just wished he could tell her everything.

He tried not to think about the vivid flashes he recalled of that dark explosion right before he passed out. They were more of a feeling than a memory. It felt like he had blanked the moment from his memory, but there was still a lingering sensation of that dark power he could feel.

He was sure the power had come directly from him.

Whatever it was – whatever had happened – he knew he had to keep it to himself. Until he knew more about what it could mean. It was powerful enough to take down the entire iron forge; and it was inside James. *More secrets I need to learn about my old self*, he thought grimly.

Had he felt such power before? He didn't think so, but maybe there had been very faint echoes of something, stirring, deep inside him. He had felt something similar when they had disturbed that dragon spirit within the Grillock Caves. The dragon had seemed to look directly at him, like it was drawn to him. At the time, James thought it was all in his head, but maybe there had been something to it. Now he thought about it, Sam did mention the caves had an old dark energy lingering within them. And Evan mentioned sensing something dark and powerful, that had struck him hard, when he tried to heal James's burnt hand.

Liana was watching him closely. "Where did you go?" she asked.

James shook his head. "Just still a little tired, I think." His mind swam with so many thoughts, he felt like he needed to lie back down.

She lifted a hand to his face, curling away some hair from his forehead. "You need a haircut," she said, smiling more.

He smiled back, trying to look positive and cheerful. Then pressing matters came to him. "Jaxx is here, right? What's going on with him?"

"We have him detained. It's all under control." Liana nodded towards the open doors of the balcony. "Sam is out there. Why don't you go see him, and he can brief you on the current situation? Get some air, too."

"Sure," James said. "Thanks."

He took a sip of his sagka, swallowing the fiery liquid, and got to his feet with Liana steadying him. Den gave James a slow nod as he passed by on the way to the balcony. The old man had a way of saying a lot with a look, and this one told James he was glad to see him, and that they would talk later. James was glad to have Den around, feeling comforted by his presence.

James stepped out into the cool evening air, coming up beside Sam on the balcony. His friend had a melancholic look as he stared out towards the dull grey shapes of the dunes around them. James leaned on the railing and regarded him.

Sam turned to him, his voice soft and thoughtful. "I'm proud of you, James."

"For still somehow being alive?" James asked.

Sam smiled, though he still looked pensive. "For how far you've come in such a short time. I should have believed in you more. I should have been more open with you. But you showed us all what you're really capable of."

James remained holding his gaze for a long moment, wondering if Sam was talking about the dark power that had exploded from him. He could only see sorrow and regret, however, furrowing Sam's brows.

"I overreacted," James said. "When I found out me and you were once friends."

"I think I definitely overreacted more," Sam said, some of the tension in his face leaving him as he turned full-bodied to James. "I am really sorry, James, for lying to you about everything. But I assure you, I'm done with all that now. I'm an open book. You can ask me anything, and I'll tell you everything you want to know."

James nodded. "Thank you. I appreciate that. And I will ask you a lot of questions. Just not right now. I still have a pounding headache and I probably won't remember half of what you tell me." He took another sip of the sagka.

"For now, though," James said, feeling warmth flush his chest, "I'd like to know what's going on with Jaxx. Is all this over, now?"

"It's over. Jaxx will be out of our hands in a few hours, then he'll be the military's problem." Sam paused with a distant, strained look in his eyes. "We discovered he wasn't working alone, however. He had an employer, it looks like. Doon."

The name sent a chill through James. "Doon? The man who almost killed me? The man who's still looking for me?" *Along with the Dark Sorcerer and who knows who else.*

Sam nodded gravely. "We have some of Jaxx's reports that say the army could be greater than a hundred thousand soldiers. But as I said, we're done with this now, it's up to the Avancheon to handle him. Den says he'll be going with them once their ambassador heads back. Evan, too."

"Yeah," James said, a lump forming in his throat. "I heard Evan was going with them." He met Sam's eyes and added, "Sam, this is far from over. You know that, right? You can feel it? If there's such a large army hiding out there somewhere, we need to do something about it."

"It's not for us to intervene in military and government matters."

"We are the military. You are. Liana is. Surely we can have some part in this still? We're the ones that brought Jaxx in. We've looked into him more than anyone else has, as far as we know." James hesitated, not wanting to reveal more. He couldn't tell Sam he had a feeling that something big was stirring, because he thought it came from whatever was inside him. The dark power. He shook his head, guessing he was making too much of everything. He was likely just imagining things.

But still... something was shifting out there, in the galaxy. He just knew it.

He felt a presence beside them and turned to see Evan stepping out onto the balcony with them. As usual he was quiet and his steps made no sound.

"I was just thinking," Evan said, standing before them with his hands clasped behind his back. "Despite our differences, we three made a good team."

"We could have used some more practice together," Sam said, "but I agree. We accomplished something that was no easy feat. And with only a little help from a small army."

Evan looked thoughtful as he stared into the distance between James and Sam. He seemed to be in a reflective mood. "I will miss you both dearly once I leave. You have my thanks, for everything. We have achieved our goals, even if our journey was not as expected."

"What will you do next?" James asked him.

"Liaise with the Oneron military," Evan said, "and reclaim my kingdom. I do not know the details as of yet, but I am confident."

"You'll accomplish great things," Sam said. "I know it. Your people are in good hands."

Evan nodded appreciatively.

James couldn't help but feel a sense of change. Everything would be different now. He could work towards being a full soldier again, and be strong enough to help those who needed it, as well as make some kind of life for himself. Maybe on Carnan; maybe somewhere else. Evan would be gone, too, and James didn't think he would see him again.

"And you, Sam?" James asked.

Sam shrugged lightly. "No idea. But, I feel that I'm close to where I belong, right now."

James nodded. "I know the feeling." He watched as Liana approached them from inside.

She stopped in the open doorway of the balcony and eyed them all with a troubled look that gave James pause. She looked pale.

"We've just received word from the Avancheon," she said, her voice heavy and dull. "A large ship has been detected on route to Carnan. A lost Great War Ship. Larger than any that have been seen for a century."

Sam tensed beside James. "Doon?"

Liana nodded, looking even more severe. "That's our guess. We estimate he'll get here in two days. If the ship stays on trajectory."

"How large is this ship?" Evan asked.

"We're waiting for a visual on it, but it's big. Maybe big enough to house a one thousand-strong army. Or maybe there'll only be a large garrison. We'll have more information soon."

James felt his stomach drop. A great sense of dread had filled the air, sending a chill through him as they regarded each other with stern expressions.

"He's coming for us, right?" James asked. "For blowing up the forge that was making his weapons?"

"We can assume so," Liana said. "Maybe we pissed him off. Or maybe him coming here has nothing to do with us."

James wasn't so sure. He couldn't help but feel that Doon was coming for *him*, in particular. Maybe the Dark Sorcerer would be with him. He looked over at Evan and frowned. They were losing their strongest magic user, right when they needed him the most.

"The Avancheon are coming too," Liana told them. "They'll be here before he does, hopefully, with several ships. So we'll be ready for him. By the time he gets here we should have a better idea of how many life-forms are on his ship."

Sam shook his head. "I don't like any of this."

Liana met his eyes. "I know. Neither do I." She pointed her head behind her. "I have some things to take care of. We'll talk later."

James noted her eyes lingering on him as she turned to leave, but couldn't determine what the look meant. A part of him did think he knew what she was thinking. What they were all thinking.

Another fight was coming. A big one. And they were all going to have to be involved.

He clenched his fist as he stood there beside Sam and Evan, willing himself to be strong enough to face whatever was coming. His drink still in his other hand, he took a big gulp of the fiery whiskey-sagka.

"Looks like this is far from over," Sam said to no one in particular.

Evan held a troubled look as he nodded, staring into the distance.

James had a lot of training to do, and not much time to recover from his injuries. His head still throbbed with a faint ache and his muscles felt weak, but he had to be sure he was ready for the next fight. He was an Oneron soldier, and he had to do what was right to fight for and protect the ones he cared about. Fight to protect everything.

Doon was coming, but that wasn't what bothered him the most. He couldn't help but feel there was something even bigger out there. Something that would shake the entire galaxy. He just had to learn more about what was really inside him.

Whatever was coming next, he'd be ready for it.