

Chapter Eighteen: Unsettled Business - Part one

Their steps crunched on the gravelly ground, accompanied by the sounds of chirping insects as they joined the main street that ran through Toolin.

Houses and shuttered shops lined the wide street. There was something serene, almost haunting, about a quiet, empty street in the dim light. James envied the people that lived here, and the simple lives they must lead. Adjusting the sword on his hip, James looked over the lightening sky with a warm, content feeling in his stomach. Their brief stay at Tabetha's had reminded him how good a pleasant, inviting situation could be, especially with good company. Despite the nice distraction, he knew that their real journey was only just beginning.

He thought about the unknown dangers they faced ahead, and of the wider world out there he still had yet to see. And he welcomed it all. He felt ready, perhaps for the first time, to really begin the rest of his life. He tried not to think about their upcoming confrontation with Higerio Jaxx and remain focused on the present. He still had a long way to go, especially with restoring his friendship with Evan, but he felt better about moving forward now.

"How far to this Riondon?" Evan asked, walking on the other side of Sam.

Sam raised his chin ahead of them. "There are stables at the end of town, where we can hire some mousslos. Should take us around six hours to ride to Riondon. That's taking the longer route, away from the main road where we might be spotted by roaming Red Guards or any Sacre spies. We can't afford the luxury of a straight public road, or to take a transport craft."

"And if a roaming Redcraft spots us from the sky?" James asked.

"They may just see three locals in the desert and think nothing of it," Sam said, and nodded to their new desert cloaks.

The buildings lessened ahead and the area opened to more vegetation and sparse trees. On the left side of the edge of town, the metallic, ridged roofs of the stables could be seen over an alley wall. The hilly dunes of the surrounding land spread out ahead of them, mostly shadows and dull shapes in the low light. Tiny specks of lights could be seen on the sharp peaks that lined the horizon, likely from mountain villages.

They approached the stalls and found the sleeping form of a rotund man, spread out on a fold-out chair. The man's broad arms were crossed over a heavy cloak that hung down his front and back, similar to the ones they wore. A wide-brimmed hat hid his face.

Sam cleared his throat loudly. When the large man did not stir, Sam shrugged and kick at his chair. Jerking back, the burly man threw his arms out to steady himself, letting out a heavy grunt. His small eyes searched them, a long, bushy moustache rising as he frowned.

"Looking for business?" he asked in a thick Canarrian accent, heavy with sleep.

"Three mousslos," Sam told him. "To Riondon."

The merchant scratched the stubble over his fleshy cheeks. "Aye. Okay." With a loud groan he rose to his feet and nodded towards the stalls. They followed his waddling strides.

James noted a sign hanging on a beam over the stalls, the words *Sumid's Animal Hire* crudely written in faded paint, beside Canarrian words.

"Just to Riondon? Or keep longer?" the merchant asked.

"Just to Riondon," Sam said. "We'll drop them off at the stalls on the border."

The merchant nodded, breathing loudly through his mouth. "Three mousslos. Forty five jous. Fifteen jous back when you give to Riondon."

At the gate of the stalls James glimpsed the tall forms of the mousslos through the wooden slats. He had seen the four-legged animals a few times before, but had never thought of riding one before.

The merchant turned to them and said, "Saddles around back. You wait here." With that he waddled around the stalls and turned a corner, the sounds of his shuffling feet eventually fading.

The chirping insects filled the silence that followed, along with the stirring of the mousslos in the stalls. James rubbed his nose, attempting to clear the strong muddy smells attacking him.

"You ever ridden one of these before?" James asked Sam.

"Not a mousslo, but I imagine they aren't that different from a horse."

"I wonder how that is," James said, almost to himself. He wondered if he had ever ridden an animal before, or how he would do once he was on one. It was a shame that there were no ships or landcraft to rent in town to get to Riondon.

"We have horses back home," Evan said. "They are bred by the human people in the southern lands. All great warriors are trained to fight while mounted."

James thought he caught a look from Evan as he said that, and took that as another personal dig at him. Then Evan spoke again.

"It is no wonder you have no memory of riding one, James."

Anger flared within James. "I see," he said, trying to remain calm. "Because I'm no soldier. I get it."

"I am merely stating an observation," Evan said. He was attempting to sound casual, but came across as smug and goading.

"Evan," Sam said. "Maybe warriors on your planet ride horses, but not all soldiers do so."

"No, Sam," James said. "Evan knows what he means. And I can handle myself."

Evan scoffed. The sound sent a jolt of fury through James and his face flushed.

"You have hardly proven that you can handle yourself," Evan said. "I do not mean to attack you, but that is a factual statement."

"Oh really," James said, his shoulders heaving with his heavy breaths. He took a step closer to Evan.

Sam held a hand up. "Stop this, now."

James shouldered Sam's hand away. "What about you, Evan? You didn't even know what planet you were on before I told you. How can you think you can save your people? Do you even know how to get back home? I was the one that agreed to look after you in Tyken Town, even without knowing you or trusting you. Why are you so hard on me? You should take a look at yourself."

"I sought the help of a witless fool," Evan shot back.

James leaned closer. "Then why are you still with us?"

Sam laid his hands on their chests and shoved them back. "That's enough!" he shouted. "Both of you. That's enough."

Evan charged back towards James. "My chances are better on my own in the desert than they are with you." Evan scowled. "An empty shell."

James's arm swung out. His fist hit Evan on the jaw and sent him tumbling to the dirt.

James stood frozen, not believing what he had just done. Evan glared up at him, anger and surprise in his large eyes. A thin line of blood ran out from his mouth.

A tense moment of silence passed as they stared at each other.

"This ends now," Sam said, calm yet firm.

James tried to steady his breaths, but was still shocked at what he had done. Evan rose onto his feet. His desert cloak was covered in dirt.

"I mean it," Sam said. "We cannot go on with the two of you like this."

James and Evan held each others eyes. A part of James knew that there was no going back from this. He had crossed a line that had changed everything.

Evan turned to look back the way they had come. It was then that James realised there were figures approaching, walking down the road towards them.

Three of them - broad shouldered and rounded, hairless heads - easily cleared seven feet, while the other two were more human-proportioned. As they got closer, James's heart jolted when he recognised the leading man.

The hunter from earlier, Audlin, walked up the road with three Mukks. A dark-skinned man in brown, close-fitting robes accompanied them. A long, curved sword was in Audlin's hand, and his men also had their weapons drawn—the Mukks carried two staffs and a hammer, while the dark man had a knife in each hand, connected by a rope on the handles.

Dust drifted in the air as their booted steps came to a stop several feet away.

"Fancy that, running into you fellas again," Audlin said with a surprised tone that fooled no one. "Heading out of town, are we?"

"We had settled our business together," Sam said in a tight voice. "No one wants any more trouble."

"Oh, I agree," Audlin said, nodding and tightening his brows. "You had settled your business. But, I haven't settled mine. Now, we don't need to get messy like last time. I realised I went about things the wrong way." He held up a heavy looking sack, around the size of a head. "This here is filled with gold coins. Ten thousand worth. A tidy little nest. So make it easy for us all. Give us the lengki, and this is all yours. You can even keep the sceptre too."

As if to emphasise his point, Audlin shook the sack, its contents clinking.

Evan stepped forward. "No more, huntsman," he said harshly, trembling with rage. "Gods children are not for buying. It baffles me how people like you think they can take what they want, with no consequences."

"You're wrong there, short-step." Audlin said. "Every action has a consequence, of that I'm certain. Now it's up to you fellas to choose your next actions. And face the consequences."

"No more," Evan said, his teeth bared. "I will end you, here. You have made a grave mistake returning."

A smirk crossed Audlin's stubbled face. "Suits me. You'll fetch me a high price. By tomorrow you'll be shackled and gagged. Mark my words."

Evan cried out, his anger giving his voice a shrill edge. He drew his sword from over his shoulder and stomped towards Audlin and his men.

"Evan, wait," Sam called out.

James gave Sam a quick look, but Sam was already moving in Evan's wake.

James's temple throbbed as he quickly caught up to them. He was still hot from his argument with Evan, but now his heart raced even more. He kept his sword sheathed, hoping he would not have to use it.

But when Evan met Audlin, the battle began.