

## Chapter Thirteen: An Eventful Dinner - Part One

Wiping a hand over the steamed mirror, James Island studied his naked form in the cleared section of glass.

The tension of the day had been washed off with a long, hot shower, and made him realise just how dirtied and battered he'd become. Long ringlets of wet blond hair hung over his reddened face. He stuck out his chin and noted the small scar on the bridge of his nose—from a staff swung by a guard on the roof of the Lailen Technical warehouse. That one had stung. The long gashes down his left shoulder, a gift from an inhabitant of the Grillock Caves, had crusted over and only caused a slight pain when he moved his arm. Sam's healing touch had done a good job, James mused. Perhaps the influence of magic wasn't so bad after all.

The thought made him consider his own demise, two years earlier. Healed by some Dark Magic which had also taken away his memories. Was there still some of that influence over him? Effecting him like that spell over Tyken Town had effected people's focus of him? He shook away the thoughts with a shudder.

Tabetha had no clothes fit for men around the house, and so James had to re-dress into his dusty long-shorts. Atleast he had recently bought a new shirt. He wondered if the lack of men's clothes in the house meant that Tabetha was single. Then he wondered if he should be thinking such things with Sam around. The two of them certainly seemed close.

After dressing, he ran his fingers through his hair and attempted to make himself somewhat presentable, and after giving himself one last cursory look, he left the bathroom.

Waking along the carpeted corridor, James made his way down the stairs to the main living room. There he saw Evan and Tabetha's aunt, Hettie, sitting with tea cups in their hands. The sight gave James pause, and he considered what a bizarre and unexpected moment he was witnessing. Evan, a saucer in one hand and carefully sipping his tea with the other, while staring blankly ahead, was enough to make James chuckle.

"Oh, you're out," Tabetha called from the kitchen to the left.

Through the large arch that separated the kitchen to the main room, James saw her stepping around Sam, who was busy over two pots on the stove. A warm smell of toasted bread and something lemony wafted through the room, a light smoke drifting out of the open window in the kitchen.

"Shower's free, Sam," James said, "if you wanted to have one too."

Sam shook his head, still with his back to him. "After dinner, I will. Until then, I've got my hands full here."

"Here, James," Tabetha said as she picked up a cup. "I was not sure if you want a mavvo or galo nut tea. I go with galo. Thought you might have... sweet-tooth."

She handed James the tea and gave him a warm smile. Her heavy lids gave her a sleepy, almost seductive look, which momentarily held James.

"You're so kind," James said, and then wondered why he had said that. It came out so formal and awkward. He felt his face redden.

Tabetha rubbed his arm, leaning closer. "And you're so lovely." She turned and hurried back into the kitchen, and added, "Dinner almost ready."

Her quick movements reminded James of the first time they met her at her flower stall, and he got the sense that rushing about and maintaining order was a big part of Tabetha's personality. He couldn't imagine her sitting and relaxed.

"Can I help?" James offered.

"No, no," came her response from the kitchen. "Don't be silly. You sit and relax."

Evan was sat on the far side of the sofa, away from Hettie's armchair. James sat on the sofa end near Hettie. He offered her a smile, but the old lady did not acknowledge his presence.

Being a guest of a Canarrian, who famously prided themselves on their hospitality and hosting skills, reminded James of the times he had gone to Tam's house for dinner. His foreman was a different man outside of work. While he still retained his gruff exterior and habit of speaking his mind, having no patience for false niceties, Tam was distinctly more relaxed and mellow at home. His wife would always go out of her way to make sure James was comfortable. Seeing Tabetha rush about in the kitchen, her hospitality so far, and the smells of Canarrian food, brought a warm, familiar smile to James.

"What do they call this?" Evan asked, studying the contents of his cup. Having showered first, the Voarn's smooth features were uncharacteristically clean and unblemished. His pointed ears were prominent now that his wavy brown hair was combed back. To James, he resembled a child forced to wash up for a fancy dinner party.

"Tea," James told him. Unsure if Evan understood, he added, "Boiling water poured over a nut, which infuses to create a flavour. You could add milk or honey, or leave as is." He looked between his own cup and Evan's. "Yours is a light brown, so you must have the mavvo nut. A savoury taste. Mine is a richer red, from the sweeter galo nut."

Evan regarded the contents of both cups, with a more serious look than James thought was warranted for discussing tea. James found himself smiling. Usually he was the one unfamiliar with things, and it felt good to be the one explaining something to someone else.

Eventually Evan nodded. He frowned and placed the cup onto the table, the saucer clattering lightly.

"Not to your taste?" James asked.

Evan shook his head and rubbed the bridge of his nose wearily. "Thus far, since entering this planet, I have yet to find a taste to my liking."

"Really?" James asked. "Nothing at all?" Now that he thought of it, Evan hadn't eaten much from their supplies in the Grillock Caves, and he certainly hadn't taken well to the beer in the tavern. He had been on Carnan for at least two days, James figured. That was a long time to go without liking the local flavours.

"I do not intend on staying on this planet for much longer, anyway," Evan said.

James paused. "What will you do?"

"The gods saw fit to bring me here, to find you." Evan kept his focus ahead, staring blankly. "And yet it appears they were in error. After I help you and Sam discover the true purpose of Higero Jaxx in the Riondon Iron Forge, I will see how, if at all, it connects to the Arbiter. My suspicion is that the hidden army was a part of the forces that attacked my land. Though I have no evidence of this yet."

James was unsure of what to say. He hadn't realised that Evan was planning on leaving, but then, he knew he was right. If their investigation into Higero Jaxx had no connection to Evan's homeland, then there would be no reason for him to stay on Carnan. A hollow feeling grew in James's stomach. If only he could have been the hero that Evan was told he would be. But even if James was the soldier he once was... what could he do for him?

Evan was certainly easier to talk to when he was in a calmer mood like this, and a far cry from the raging anger that tended to rise in him. James thought back to Den Keenosh, who had called Evan 'troubled'. He still wondered exactly what Den had meant.

James placed his cup down on the table and noticed the frame tilt slightly with the weight. He gently shook the table edge and saw there was a leg that was unhinged. The joint looked rusted. Without thinking, his hand moved to a toughlet on his forearm and clicked open a compartment, withdrawing a small screwdriver. In another compartment he removed a long screw, which looked to match the old one in the table. He was aware of Evan watching him carefully as he removed the old screw and inserted the new one, screwing it in tightly. While he was at it, he leaned over and tightened the rest of the table legs. It was a strange feeling, he noted, to do something so mundane that reminded him of his old work. Almost as if he was back to his old self. He was quietly satisfied with the sturdiness of the table once he was done.

Movement from Hettie caught James's eye. The old woman regarded them both with wide eyes. The sharp lines of her frail face stretched with her opened mouth.

"Hon-al-lalussa," she muttered in a frail voice, looking over the room.

James noted the long line of a scar that wound around Hettie's right arm, disappearing up her sleeve. The faint mark looked more like a tattoo, or a very old marking. He wondered what kind of event could have caused such a precise pattern.

A tight knot built up in his stomach as he watched the old lady. Her confused expression, the fear in her eyes, was all-too common for him. *Is that what I looked like? When I first awoke and didn't know where I was, or who I was?* Seeing someone else struggle with their memories, in a way that James could not even imagine, sent a numbing shiver through him.

Tabetha jogged over and spoke soothingly to her Aunt. She turned to them, smiling reassuringly. "She is... she forgets, sometimes. But she is fine. And still happy to be having you all."

She stood and paused, looking back at James. "Oh, I just remembered." She went to a side table and retrieved a heavy-looking book from a drawer. "While you were in the shower, we said of your travels, and that you were learning the magical arts."

James raised his brows. "I was what?"

Tabetha smiled and offered him the large book. "An old book on the... fundamentals of magic. You will find it useful in your studies."

James looked from the book to Tabetha's expectant gaze, and then to Sam, who now approached from the kitchen.

"Tabetha hears what she likes," Sam said as he joined them. "We mentioned your sword training, and while we explained that it did not also mean magical training, she nonetheless took it to mean so."

Tabetha's wide eyed expression did not falter as she urged the book towards James. For second he was captivated by her large, expectant eyes. Reluctantly, he took the heavy book. Etched in a shiny gold writing were the words, *Divine Essences and Godly Gifts*. James resisted opening the hard cover and glancing over its pages, unsure of what he would find inside. He wasn't quite ready to delve into a magical world. He still had to make sense of his real world.

"Thanks," James found himself saying, not wanting to offend their host by refusing the gift.

"Don't worry James," Sam said. "Nothing's expected of you. It's just an idea."

James regarded them both a moment longer, before nodding. It wouldn't hurt to read up on a few things, he figured.

Tabetha elbowed Sam and leaned into him playfully. "Hey, who is looking over the bread? Huh?" She took Sam by the hand and led him back into the kitchen with a bouncy step.

"May I see the book?" Evan asked, holding a small hand out.

James considered it—and then wondered why he hesitated—before handing over the magic book.

"You know this stuff, right?" James asked him. "I mean... you said you were taught magic?"

"Aye, we had sorcery practical lessons along with the history of magical sources," Evan said.

James could see large paragraphs written on the faded cream pages, along with a few black and white images and symbols. There was a distinct smell of dust in the air as Evan carefully turned the pages.

"So, you know how to heal wounds, I've seen. And wind magic."

"Alunka," Evan said. He looked up at James. "Wind sorcery. We call it Alunka. My family is strong with the craft." He turned away in thought, before re-focussing on the book. "I am also trained in Throkris, Earth sorcery. The healing arts are called Elatha. I have passing knowledge of others, also."

"The Voarn are strong magic user, right?"

"As are the Oneron," Sam said, stepping towards them and wiping his hands on a towel. "Perhaps not as naturally gifted as the Voarn, but we are known for our magic as well as our grapple hooks."

"We're a talented bunch," James muttered. He couldn't help but feel unnerved with all the magic talk, and the thought that he would likely have to start using it. "So I could use magic. Before?"

"Oh, you certainly could," Sam said, coming over to them. "Come on, dinner's ready. We can talk more while we eat."