

## Chapter Fourteen: The James Island That Once Was - Part One

An hour after dinner, James was sat on a bed in the upstairs room that Tabetha had provided for them. An empty bed was against the opposite wall, with wooden shelves and drawers lining the walls. The low thrum of a slow-spinning ceiling fan filled the silence of the room.

He had cursed himself for being such a moonbrain and not realising his words would have affected Evan so badly. He hadn't even thought about enslaving people, and yet that's how it came out to Evan. He shook his head, telling himself that he should not be allowed to speak to anyone. Self-loathing thoughts of inadequacy sunk him into a deep despair.

A part of him now wanted to bite back at Evan, and stand up for himself. But James had never been a confrontational person. He had never been good with talking to people, even when it came to mundane casual talk. He had spent so long trying to hide his amnesia from the people he got to know, he didn't even know how to openly talk to someone, without fear of what they might think of him. Tam had often encouraged James to keep his head down and always mind his manners. That was all James knew.

Attempting to focus his mind elsewhere, James had decided to look over the magic book given to him by Tabetha. It had made him realise how thankful he was for still having the ability to read. He could have just as easily had no previous knowledge of any education - or even basic motor functions - along with his lack of training and personal experiences. He shuddered at the thought of waking up with the brain of a newborn child. He sighed and thought, *I'm not that far off a two year old brain, from the way I acted at dinner...*

The book was opened on the page that detailed the recognised classes of magic: *Fire, Ice, Lightning, Earth, Wind, Restoration, Illusion, Light, Dark, Holy, Death, Time, Spirit*, and *Silk*. It was a huge list that made his head spin just thinking about it all. A note mentioned a fifteenth class, which was covered in a later chapter.

*When he looked over a summary of the fundamentals of magic, he read a passage titled Magical Realms. It told him that each magical class is derived from the powers of a god, and each god dwells in their own realm of existence.* The Wind Realm, for example, consists of an endless, empty air space, and if someone were somehow able to enter the realm, they would end up falling forever, unless they had the power of flight, an ability only available to a Master of Wind Magic.

*James read on.* While there are considered to be hundreds of gods in the known galaxy, there are fourteen that are considered Universal Gods, also called the All-Gods. The most widely recognised gods in the galaxy range from Meilos, the Lord of the Gods and Holy Father, to his antithesis, Darsagoth, the Dark Lord of Evil, also known as the Devil.

He had read once about the many wars between the gods throughout the known history of the galaxy. He still thought of them as stories, even if something inside him felt that he already knew they were real. Maybe that's why he had trouble getting along with Evan, who was so adamant about his own faith and belief in gods.

Looking over more pages, skimming over subject headings and making mental notes of what to look another time, one section caught James's eye. A stylised image depicted a dragon up on its back legs, head raised and breathing fire. The passage, titled *The Eternal Dragons*, spoke of the ancient dragons that had roamed many planets millennia ago. Some, it mentioned, were even thought to be able to fly through space. They were considered colossal, magnificent beasts, unlike their evolved ancestors that lived in present day.

A shudder shook his shoulders. Enormous dragons, like the one they had seen in the Grillock Caves. The passage spoke of eternal dragon dreams, and how their memories were thought to never fade. Was that what they had come across? Had they glimpsed the dream of the slumbering dragon spirit, deep within the caves? James still couldn't help but feel that the dragon had specifically focused on *him*. Like it was drawn to him.

The idea reminded him of the Dark Sorcerer, that evil being who was meant to be out there somewhere trying to pinpoint James's location. There was far too much focus on James that he would have liked, by a long way. And yet he didn't even know who he himself was, let alone why others would be interested in him.

The bedroom door opened. Sam walked in with a towel wrapped around his waist, running a hand over his wet hair.

"There are few things better in this world than a long overdue shower," Sam said as he crossed the room to his clothes draped over a chair. "Evan not been up yet?"

James shook his head, a familiar anguish tightening his stomach. "I think he's downstairs with Tabetha and her aunt."

"Tabetha is readying her aunt for bed," Sam told him as he began to dress. He didn't seem to mind that his bare ass showed while he pulled on his underwear, keeping his back to James. "Maybe he's finishing his tea before he comes up."

James closed the magic book, and got a waft of musky dust from the pages. "I'm such an idiot," he said, shaking his head.

"Don't be too hard on yourself. We know you didn't mean any harm."

"I just don't know why he hates me so much."

Sam turned to him. "Evan is lost, and confused, and very afraid. He doesn't hate you. He hates how helpless he is to protect his people."

"Back in the tavern, Evan talked about leaving Carnan. He said that once his business was done with us, once he could determine if Jaxx has anything to do with the Arbiter, that he would be going back home."

"He's only with us temporarily," Sam said. "And only because his past may connect with our present concerns. We don't have to like each other, but we must learn to work together if we're going to accomplish anything. In the meantime, I suggest you continue to focus on yourself."

James nodded. He knew Sam was right.

"Back in Tyken Town," James said, a thought occurring. "When we were leaving the city, entering the underground tunnel. I overheard Rolan say something to Evan."

Sam raised a brow. "The gang leader? I wouldn't know how much we can trust anything he said."

That was for sure. Rolan had fought Evan for ownership of Evan's family sword, and was far from an honourable and trustworthy person. Even if he had ended up helping them leave the city.

"I know," James said, "but, it was weird. He said something like... Like he knew about Evan's... something? 'That thing, inside you', I think he put it. I don't really remember what he said exactly but it sounded like he knew something about Evan. Something he was hiding."

"We're all hiding something," Sam said. "I don't think Evan poses any kind of threat for us. We just need to learn to get along with him. His ways are very different to ours."

James nodded in thought. When he looked up, he noted the taught muscles that ran through Sam's body as he dressed, seeing the years of conditioning that a soldier must go through. He considered his own form, long and lean, and broad shouldered like Sam, but James still could not see himself as the military soldier he was meant to have been.

"Sam..." James said quietly, looking over the scars on Sam's neck and shoulder. "I can't tell you how sorry I am, and how bad I feel, about what happened in the Grillock Caves."

Sam turned to him and stepped closer. His face was etched in hard lines, his eyes dark and intense as they locked on to James. Something passed over Sam, as if a great shadow tortured him.

"Listen to me, James." His voice was barely a whisper. "A lot can happen in the heat of battle. And we have to live with the consequences of our actions. We can either let it consume us, and define us. Or we learn to accept it and move on. And we become stronger for it."

"I know, Sam. I know." James said solemnly. "It's just... I keep seeing you surrounded by those beasts. Seeing it grab you from behind. Your face as its teeth bit into you. I keep getting flashes of those moments, and in an instant I can feel the dread that hit me then, as if I were back there."

Sam's countenance was both understanding and severe. "If you focus on the pain, you will suffer. If you focus on the lesson, you will grow."

A chill ran through James. He nodded, understanding. "I promise, I won't let it hold me back. I won't hold back, any more." And he told himself that was the truth.

Sam's casual air returned as he held out a hand. "Here, pass me your sat-com."

"On the table there," James said, pointing his chin towards the table beside his bed. "Why?"

Sam collected the sat-com and placed it onto a unit on a corner table. The displays of the charging station lit up when the device clipped into place.

"Should keep it charged while we can," Sam said. "As it's our only one."

The door opened once again and Evan walked in. His movements were slow and careful as he closed the door and looked between them. His flattened, combed hair had restored some of its wavy wildness.

James immediately tensed at seeing him, the feelings of anger and resentment rising up.

"How goes it, Evan?" Sam asked in a casual tone.

Evan remained by the door. "I must apologise for my earlier... misunderstanding. I should not have taken your words so." His eyes shifted from James to the carpet. His mouth opened, but he appeared to have difficulty saying more, and fell silent.

James paused. He expected Evan to come in hot, but had never expected an apology. Eventually James let out a low sigh. He had never wanted things to go this way.

"It was my fault," James said.

"No," Evan said quickly. "The fault is mine."

"I shouldn't have been so insensitive," James said. "It was just my stupidity. I didn't mean anything by it. And, you were right. I should have said something to Sam before, about what happened in the caves. That was on me."

"I understand," Evan said, nodding slowly. "Please, let us put it behind us."

Sam clapped and rubbed his hands together, keeping a casual, cheery manner. James knew he was trying to diffuse the tension in the room. "Good idea," Sam said.

Evan approached the bed opposite James. Both his sword and the golden sceptre were placed against the wall there.

For some reason, seeing Evan beside two powerful weapons gave James an uneasy feeling. It did mean a lot that Evan would apologise, but James couldn't help the lingering feeling of hot anger within him. He told himself that he would put it behind him, if Evan was willing to.

"So," Sam began as he stood in the centre of the room, now fully dressed in his cream shirt and long-shorts. "We have a few hours of sleep here, before we head out. There's a mousslo merchant at the edge of town, where we can find transport to Riondon. Leaving while it's still dark out will be our best bet, considering the Red Guards are looking for us. I intend to take us through the Carnan Sand Dunes, away from the main roads, where we're less likely to be seen."

James nodded. "Any number of hours sleeping in a bed would be good for me."

Sam rolled his shoulders and stretched his arms, working out the tension there.

"Before we leave in the morning, I will have a better look at your injuries," Evan said. "Sleep will do us good. And a more careful healing will be in order, for us to keep moving at our best."

Sam nodded. "You'll have my thanks." He looked to each side at them both. "Now, Evan, I'm glad you're here. I have a tale to tell and I believe that you'd be interested to hear it, almost as much as James would."