

## Chapter Thirty Five: Dark Meetings

Evan was drifting out of consciousness when he heard James enter their sleeping quarters. They had been given a row of bunks near the corner of a large room filled with beds. Other members of the outpost had come and gone - most were asleep at the moment - but Evan sensed when James entered the room. The metal bunk beside him creaked as James climbed into bed. Evan lay with his back to the sounds, aware that James's side light remained on for some time. The soft turning of pages told him James was looking through a book; likely the magic book given to him by Tabetha.

It had been a very long day, and yet James still felt compelled to read rather than sleep. There was something admirable there. And yet sleep was the last thing on Evan's mind too.

He refocused on his task, ignoring the sounds of the room, and searched inwards. One of the books Melida suggested had contained a concept that intrigued him. A meditative state where one could search within themselves and find their deepest and truest voice. It was a training exercise meant to help people find their way in life, but it could also be a way for Evan to communicate with his demonic resident.

Melida was right; it was better for him to learn more about the demon and look to secure his power over it. It had not fully revealed itself since Evan overpowered it, and he had begun to worry that it was scheming something, waiting for the right moment to strike.

In a way, the meditation was like searching for the spark within himself. As such, it didn't take him long to enter a dream-like state.

It was only when he became aware of the black void surrounding him that he realised he had entered the realm he sought. The darkness was broken only by a faint mist that was hard to see. Evan would have thought himself floating in this empty vacuum were it not for the solid feeling under his boots.

He remained still, assessing the environment and his state of consciousness.

"You." The harsh voice was barely a whisper, yet it rumbled and echoed around the black expanse.

"Where are you?" Evan asked.

A silence followed, before the voice said, "Leave."

"I just want to talk."

Evan stood there for some time, the faint grey mist slowly moving around him. It was so quiet he could hear his heart thumping in his ears.

It took him a moment to realise the darkness was shifting. Colours formed and a light grew. The ground became dark red and a night sky appeared over him. Trees and grass materialised all around, along with the soft roar of waves and quiet chirps of insects.

Evan's breath caught, but it didn't surprise him that the demon could conjure his darkest memory: that night in Moon Bay.

He stepped along the beach and looked around, marvelling at how real everything felt. His boots dug into the coarse sand, his tunic sleeves wavered in the low breeze, the salt sea and earthy plants smelled as fresh as the day he was there, over thirty years earlier. Wreathed in a purple glow, the floating rocks of Moon Bay passed overhead. With apprehension, Evan turned inland towards the beach. There was no sign of their camp where it should have been, and he let out a breath he had been holding. At least the demon had not included Evan's friends in this scene.

He turned around and saw a tall figure standing several feet away. The demon was almost indiscernible against the dark ocean, but Evan would not miss the towering shadow's long-limbed form.

They stood in silence, the waves softly roaring and chill night breeze blowing sand. It knows my mind, Evan thought. It chose my darkest memory in an attempt to gain an upper hand. It still fears me. He wondered if its power extended to hearing his thoughts inside his head, like how he was thinking now.

"How are you?" Evan asked, knowing it was a stupid thing to say.

Anger emanated from the demon in rippling waves. "I am not some domesticated pet living with you, that needs its master's care. You have no comprehension of what you have done, or to whom you speak."

"Tell me," Evan said. "I want to know. Who are you? What are you?"

The large shoulders of the demon heaved with agitation. "There will be no story," it growled, then hesitated. "You may call me Runn."

"Runn?"

Another wave of hatred crossed the beach to Evan. "A name given by mortals a long time ago."

Evan wasn't sure what to make of that. He did, however, already have an impression that the demon was very old.

"I want to know about you."

"No." The word rumbled as if with a power of its own. "I have nothing to say."

Either the demon had nothing to say because it was a minor spirit of little consequence, or Runn was holding back his true identity, not wanting to reveal how strong he really was. If that was true though, then he wouldn't have allowed Evan to join their souls. If this was a truly powerful being, then Evan's simple mortal body would not be able to sustain it. Or so he would have assumed.

"Is there a way for us to live together in harmony?"

"No."

"We are bound, now," Evan said. "I believe it would be in both our best interests if we learned to live with one another."

Runn's white eyes continued to watch him, long fingers flexing by his side.

Evan looked over the beach, as if searching for a solution. The floating rocks above stirred a melancholic memory that sent a shiver through him. "Where are we, exactly?"

"Enough," the demon said. "If you will not leave, I will."

The world trembled. Trees smeared and swirled into the beach, which rolled and tumbled together, like a brush moving over a freshly painted canvas. The beach shifted into a dark expanse of blacks and whites, with some muted greys. All sounds and atmosphere stopped.

Evan remained standing in place, with the demon several feet away. A vast, grey-black world was all around them. A hot energy thrummed in the air, electrifying the atmosphere.

The demon hesitated, turning sharply to Evan with a look that could have passed for surprise. Its angry force thundered silently in the expanse. It huffed and growled furiously.

"I was not meant to follow you here, was I?" Evan said curiously. They were no longer inside his own mind, but had ventured to some other place.

Runn grunted and paced with a great agitation.

"Where are we now? Is this your mind?"

Runn let out a deep growl. "Enough. You will not return here. Listen to my words, for if you ever return here I will seek to eradicate every last part of you."

Evan took a step forward, prepared to exert a show of power if necessary.

"Be gone!" Runn screamed.

A deep reverberation shook the expanse. A blinding pain shot through Evan, shocking his insides. He cried out as his body tore apart.

Evan's moan echoed in the sleeping quarters. Darkness was all around, with moonlight coming through the windows and hitting the opposite wall. Sweat poured from Evan as he sat up, his heart pounding and head throbbing. On the bunk beside him, James Island slept soundly, as did Sam Hawkings on the bed above.

Evan remained there for some time, coming to his senses and calming himself. The wave of power the demon had struck him with was... terrifying. A cold shiver ran through him.

Eventually he lay back down on his sweat-soaked sheets and tried to sleep. But a dark memory, long buried, troubled him greatly. Evan had tried, so hard, to get Reisa to speak to him, but she wouldn't. She couldn't say a word. She would just lay there, her mind gone, and Evan had been unable to do anything for her.

He wished, more than anything, that he could have travelled to the realm wherever Reisa's mind had gone.

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The melodic chirping of mating birds mingled with the soft breeze of the peaceful afternoon air. Evan sat at a large table with his tutor, Albion Feloria, standing over him. At this time of the late afternoon, the courtyard was mostly empty, save for a couple of nearby house-servants tending to the foliage. Sun rays reached out either side of them, a large pillar behind them keeping them in the cool shade.

"Continue, young lord," Albion said with a long finger pointed at the open book on the table. The hem of his long sleeve brushed against the paper. "And tell me once you find the answer to my question."

Evan tried to focus on the tomes of history books before him, but his mind was distracted and unfocused. Everything inside him felt shaken and laid out, like a house after a storm had hit.

He had just come from Reisa's sick bed. It had been a year now since their trip to Moon Bay, and she had yet to open her eyes or say a word. The Healers say her mind is gone, and only her body remains living, though some believe she is in a sleep-like state and is able to have some understanding of her surroundings. The truth seemed to be that no one knew what had struck her.

"Evan." Albion's soft voice interrupted his thoughts. The sorcerer rarely called Evan by name. "You are not yourself."

Evan sighed, meeting his eyes. He would have told Albion what was on his mind, though his tutor likely already knew. It was all that had been on Evan's mind for a long time now.

"You can do nothing for her," Alban said. His long face was firm and rigid, his thin lips a tight line. His keen grey-green eyes, always alive with a keen awareness, studied Evan. "You will be better suited focusing on your studies and leaving her in the hands of the gods."

Evan's voice was frail and quiet when he said, "I just want to speak to her again." He wanted to hear her voice again - her laughter - and see her large, heavy-lidded eyes once more. He wanted to hold her and be held.

There was a time when Evan had thought of marrying Reisa one day. He could see his life unfold with her by his side. And now... now no one could tell him how much longer she would live in her state.

The spira spark they had caught together had been placed on the window sill of her hospital room. Evan had left it there to watch over her, but the bug remained in its docile state within the jar, and still had not turned into a Wind Stalker. Which meant that Reisa's household was not blessed by the Sky Father. That usually inferred a bad omen, although in this case it was not hard to see what that was.

"Losing the ones we love is a part of all life," Alban said in his wise, softly spoken way that usually carried a quiet tremble of emotion. He frowned deeply, twisting the thin beard lining his mouth.

"It is something we must accept and learn to move on from. Such as moving on with your studies."

Evan bit back the retort of telling him that Reisa was not lost. She was still with them. She just couldn't wake up. With a great effort he refocused on the history book.

"There." He placed a finger over a sentence. "A green glow. That's the colour of broken magic. In answer to your question."

"Not just magic. But unhinged, chaotic, volatile essences. That is what this creature was thought to possess. A broken mind powered by a volatile essence."

Evan frowned in thought. They were studying a historical creature who was said to have the ability to understand people's minds. It was a highly intriguing ability to Evan, who wanted nothing more than to speak to Reisa, and he suspected that was why Alban had chosen it for him to study.

Alban adjusted his long robes as he positioned himself to sit on the edge of the table, turning to face Evan side-on. He looked down on him with a troubled, hesitant look that caused Evan some unknown worry.

"This creature that we speak of. There are many details you would not find in any history book." Alban cast his eyes over the courtyard conspiratorially before leaning closer to Evan. "The ability that it possessed, that of knowing people's minds, is something that is

rarely to be found in our history. And it has not shown itself for hundreds of years. Until recently."

Evan held Albian's gaze, captivated and enthralled by his keen eyes. He swallowed, growing uneasy by his tutors words.

"That same gift that was bestowed upon Dagna, had been awakened in you, Evan."

A silence came over them. Evan blinked, his shoulders tensing, trying to escape the firm hold of Albian's stare.

Albian cast another quick look over their surroundings as he adjusted his position on the table and fully faced Evan. "You felt something on the night Reisa was attacked. You saw something, in the darkness. Did you not?"

Evan was finally able to look away. He had told them all several times what had happened that night at Moon Bay. How something had dragged Reisa away, and when they found her she was in an unconscious state. And yet there was more that Evan had held back. Things he had been too afraid to tell anyone.

He found the courage to meet Albian's eyes and said, "I thought I saw something." He swallowed, suddenly apprehensive. Perhaps Albian had been tasked by Evan's father to look into the matter further? There was something in Albian's tortured face, the firm set of his jaw and the tense lines around his thick brows, that told Evan he yearned for answers as much as he did.

"There was something with the light." A green light, he recalled. Like the light source of a broken essence. "I thought it were the shape of a person. Though it was dark and everything happened so suddenly."

"I believe you saw something, too," Albian said. "I believe you were the first person to witness Dagna in hundreds of years. And I believe - though I have yet to determine how - that you contracted his ability that night."

Evan shook his head. "I do not understand."

"Think, young lord. You have not been yourself this past year. You have felt a change."

"I have been distraught over Reisa. Nothing has been the same."

Albian nodded slowly, his brows relaxing. "You have not fully sensed it yet. But you do understand you have something?"

Evan searched within himself, attempting to find what Albian was talking about. There had been moments, in the past few seasons, where he had got a sense of someone being unhappy, but then that was obvious from their faces. There was one time, actually, where

he had guessed that Nat was hiding feelings for Marassy. Although that seemed obvious to Evan at the time. Some things just came down to understanding people.

"I am not sure," Evan told him honestly.

"This is what I do know. You came across the creature from legend, Dagna, and you have not been the same person since you returned that day. I have sensed something different with you, and it has taken me some time to understand what it could be. And what I fear, young lord, is that if you do not fully learn to embrace this gift you have been bestowed... that you may share the same fate as Dagna, and become a lost and twisted soul."

Evan could no longer look at him. He stared at Albian's long fingered hands, placed neatly over his robes on the knee that was half-raised on the table. Large rings shone with multi-faceted adornments.

There had been a moment, when Evan was rushing through the trees in pursuit of Reisa, that he thought he had heard something. Or, something had heard his silent pleas to release her. Evan hadn't realised it at the time, but he thought that perhaps he did see and understand a lot more about the figure within the light than he realised.

His voice was barely a whisper when he asked, "Why do you believe it was this Dagna that dampened Reisa's mind?"

"The green light you saw. It was seen only by you. The others did not recall seeing a light. What you saw was the coloured aura of Dagna, lit so bright with the burgeoning awakening of your ability."

Evan shook his head, feeling a sickening sensation churn his stomach.

"The ability we speak of," Albian said, "it is an ancient ability, long forgotten by many. I believe I have pinpointed it to what is known as The Glow. It goes by other names, such as The Way of Sight. Or simply, The Sight. I can tell you what I know about it."

A great sadness had swallowed Evan, chilling him to his core. He met Albian's firm gaze. "Why did it attack her?"

"I do not know," Albian said quietly. "Together, we may be able to find some answers."

Evan sniffed, welling with emotion. "And why me? How did I possess it's ability?"

"I suspect that it may have been dormant in you your entire life. I believe it is something that many people could possess, but it just lays inside them, unable to be tapped. And by Dagna's mere presence, it awakened the ability within you. Now, I do not know how other people's gift become awakened, but I suspect that your interaction with Dagna opened up a great power within you."

Evan shook his head, now feeling defeated by everything. He struggled to determine the breadth of Albian's words, and what they implied for Evan's future.

"We have much research to do," Albian went on, "and lots to learn about your gift. But..." he leaned closer, so that Evan had to tilt his head higher. "Listen to me. No one must know of this. It must be our secret. Until we learn what we are dealing with. Understand?"

Evan nodded, trying to control the deep tremble in his chest that tightened his throat.

"Not even the king and queen must know," Albian said. "Not until I say otherwise."

Evan nodded again. He must have appeared frightened, for Albian relaxed before him and gave him a small smile. He now spoke softer, more casually. "Very good, young lord. Henceforth this shall be your lessons alongside your studies with me. I have been tasked to teach you to wield sorcery, and a part of that tutelage will now be to help you wield your gift."

He held out a long, bony hand. Evan stared at it a moment, hovering in the space between them, and then shook it.

Evan would be determined to do whatever it took to control whatever ability he had been given. If it truly was the ability to understand people's thoughts, then perhaps he would find a way to hear Reisa's thoughts. She had to be in there, somewhere within her sleeping state. And Evan would find her. He would find her and bring her back.

And yet, fate took a different path.

Just a season later, Reisa finally slipped away from them. She was declared dead on a night filled with lightning and thunder storms. A tumultuous maelstrom that rivalled the chaos in Evan's mind.

His friend had gone from him, forever, before he could harness his ability enough to try and reach her.

From that day he vowed to himself that he would have nothing to do with his so-called gift. He refused any further lessons from Albian, and set out to forget it was ever a part of him. He wanted nothing to do with the ability that came from the creature that took Reisa from him.

After thirty years, Evan had moved on from that part of his life. A life that contained Reisa, and a life where he learned to interpret people's inner thoughts. He was no longer that person.

The spira spark remained in the jar by Reisa's sick bed, unchanged, until it was taken away.

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In the darkness of the Oneron Outpost sleeping quarters, Evan silently wept.

Things felt clearer to him, now. Pieces that looked irregular and indecipherable now fit together in ways previously unseen.

He had been wrong the entire time.

He shouldn't have denied his ability. Like he couldn't deny Runn within him. He should have been trying to master his gift all along. And he should seek to guarantee his control over the demon.

If he was of a stronger mind in his younger years, he would have voiced his feelings for Reisa earlier. He would not have given in to the doubts and insecurities that plagued him. He would have embraced her and never let go. And then, when the time came to understand the gift he was given, he had felt himself too weak to grasp it, and turned his back on it.

He needed to learn from his enemies, and from his hardships. That was what his parents had tried to teach him all those years; to embrace his enemies as though they were loved ones. Evan had never understood that before, but he believed he was starting to.

He was starting to believe he was far more capable than he thought himself to be. With each silent tear that left him, a great welling of determination built up within him.