

## Chapter Thirteen: An Eventful Dinner - Part Two

Sam helped Hettie up, saying something softly in Canarrian to her, and they made their way to the kitchen.

There was a side door on the left wall of the kitchen, which led to a dining room. A long, cloth-covered table, filled with plates of food and glasses, was set for five people.

Tabetha went to sit beside her aunt but Sam insisted their host take the seat at the head of the table, and that he would tend to her aunt if she needed anything. James took the place on Tabetha's other side, opposite Sam, while Evan sat next to him.

James looked over the chunks of roasted meat, filled with a paste of vegetables that spilled onto the long plate. There was also a heaped bowl of steaming lemon-scented rice and a small mountain of toasted bread. It all looked and smelled heavenly. He was impressed that Tabetha was able to put this all together without having expected guests today.

"This looks amazing," James said to their host.

"It is my pleasure," Tabetha said. "I don't host a lot these days, and Sam does not visit often enough. Especially with friends."

"She always outdoes herself, Tabetha does," Sam said as he spooned a large meat mound onto Hettie's plate. He said something to her in Canarrian, and the old lady nodded and muttered something back.

"Hot for meia, please," Tabetha said, gesturing to her aunt's drink.

Sam picked up a cylindrical cap and placed it on top of Hettie's cup. It clicked in place like a thick metal lid, and soon after a light steam began to rise from the edges. Sam removed the lid and the hot drink released a fruity aroma.

James took an overview of the moment. He marvelled at how odd and unexpected the situation was, and yet at the same time, how nice it was to be in such a pleasant place. They likely had a long journey ahead of them, in their search for the hidden army and uncovering Higero Jaxx's plans in Riondon. Having a good home-cooked meal with his companions certainly beat running around in dark caves.

He finished a mouthful of meat and said, "Sam, you were saying. Being an Oneron soldier, I could use a sword, swing with a grapple hook, jump over thirty feet, and use magic. All that Oneron stuff. Is that right?"

"That's correct, Isles. All that Oneron stuff," Sam said, filling his glass with juice. "You're familiar with the schools of magic?"

"I've read of them, aye," James said. "Fire, Water, Earth, Illusion, Dark, and all that. They're all sourced from a separate god, right? All... thirteen classes?"

"Fourteen recognised classes," Sam corrected. "But some can argue there are more. That's right, each magic is derived from the ancient power of a god. Fire from Ossus, Earth from Riol, Restoration from Calthea, and so forth."

"And Meilos," Tabetha added in. "Holy magic. Meilos, Lord of the Gods. Where *Meia* is derived from. Canarrian for aunt." She flashed a toothy smile at her aunt, her raised cheeks almost hiding her eyes.

Sam smiled. "Yes, and Holy magic from Meilos." He turned his attention to Evan. "Now, of course, there is no offense meant when we mention these gods, as we all know that there are many gods out in the void, some that contradict the existence of others, and some that are only believed by a few. The ones we speak of, Evan, are the ones known as the All-Gods, or the Universal Gods. You're familiar with them?"

Evan nodded. "Correct, that I am. Somewhat familiar. We Voarn have some understanding of the wider conceits of the galaxy, although we only recognise our Voarn gods. Andaano, Imupius, Thaenos, Amaan, and even Demicron."

James could tell that Evan spoke the names to reinforce his beliefs in front of them. He was certain that he did not want to get into a religious debate with the Voarn. Or anyone, for that matter. While he had read a lot about a great many things, he wouldn't be much good in a discussion. Opinions, he often thought, came from experience. Something he often greatly lacked.

"The Voarn are of broader minds than the Oneron, it seems," Sam said. "I'm sorry to say that I'm not familiar with your gods."

The vegetable paste in the meat reminded James of a dish that Tam's wife had once made. Although her vegetables were wrapped in sweetened leaves.

"And which magic classes do you know, Sam?" James asked.

Sam regarded him over the rim of his glass. "Fire, as you've seen. Restoration, too. A bit of Ice magic. And some Light. I've studied many classes but mostly have practical experience with those."

James nodded, thinking it strange that Sam had only used two of those magic classes in the time he'd known him, Fire and Restoration. Why hadn't he used other magics during their battles?

"Oh, would you prefer something else, maybe?" Tabetha was looking over at Evan.

The Voarn had a plate filled with food that remained untouched.

Evan gave her a weak smile. "My apologies. I am not very hungry. The food does look good, however."

Tabetha frowned, and somehow managed to still smile warmly. It was an odd expression that James found adorable, and his heart swelled in the moment. "Have as much as you like. I understand." James had expected her to take some offence or offer something else. Something in her knowing eyes, and the way she accepted his excuse, made him wonder if she really did understand.

Evan was avoiding James's look. It was the first time he had known Evan to hold back his feelings. He didn't admit to having no taste for the food in order to be polite and not offend their host. He took comfort in knowing that Evan had shared something with him that he was not comfortable sharing with others. He found himself smiling, taking that as a sign of Evan trusting him. Maybe there was some hope for the two of them to be friends.

"So, Tabs," Sam said. "Shall we talk about what you found?"

Tabetha covered her mouth while she chewed and swallowed. "Yes. We will."

Sam looked from James to Evan. "I asked Tabetha to look into the news casts and see if anyone is talking about the helicopter crash at Lailen Technical."

James shuddered at the memory; jumping off the roof of the warehouse in Tyken Town, holding on to the ropes attached to the helicopter that was crashing down behind them. And that was all before they were shot at by security guards and attacked by a large man that had transformed into a giant beast before their eyes.

"You are famous," she said, pointing a fork between them. "They have Red Guards looking for you."

James paused. "The Red Guards are after us?"

Tabetha held a palm up defensively. "Not you, exactly, but who broke into Lailen Technical and made a scene there. They say that confidential information was stolen, and the heads of the company went straight to the Judges, who quickly called the Red Guards."

"But we didn't steal anything," James told her. A familiar discomfort twisted his stomach. Whatever information they did find there was in Sam's satchel. The satchel that was torn from Sam while they were attacked by the grillocks. While James had stood frozen.

"One does not need to steal in order to be labelled a thief," Evan said, giving James a side look.

"It's a cover story for them," Sam said. "Something to escalate the situation and up the threat level for us."

"Who are these Red Guards?" Evan asked.

"An elite guard in Tyken Town," Sam explained. "They have city-wide authority, second only to the Judges. They can govern some of the surrounding towns, if their business is affiliated with Tyken Town."

"They never stop, once they are assigned," James told him. He'd heard many stories of the perseverance and success rate of the famed Red Guards of Tyken Town. "But... they don't know it was us, exactly? Or what we were doing there, right?"

"They don't know us," Sam reassured him. "We just went in there and looked around. I took a few photos of some documents, and the disc I inserted into their terminal was fried, and no way traceable to anyone. We may not have those photos or fried disc any more, but they wouldn't know we had them in the first place. We were in and out. No surveillance footage, otherwise they would have posted it by now, and no proof of who we were. The only one that could have identified us is Dr. Velome, and we took care of him."

"The doctor is whom Higero Jaxx is waiting to meet, correct?" Evan asked

"Correct," Sam said. "Dr. Velome has a meeting with him tomorrow. And Jaxx will find us there instead."

The last time they had seen Dr. Velome, he had been tied up in a truck, left in an underground parking station and awaiting the authorities. James guessed that the doctor must be incarcerated by now, for the illegal experiments he had been conducting.

"One more thing," Tabetha added. She paused to look over them with a hesitant expression. "Sacre has become involved."

The air stilled with tension. They remained silent until Sam spoke. "You're certain?"

"They have transmitted signals to the Riondon Iron Forge."

Sam leaned forward with his elbows on the table. "That confirms that Higero Jaxx *is* working with Sacre."

"It looks that way," Tabetha said. "You really have picked a fight with the wrong arms dealer."

"The fight hasn't started yet," Sam told her. "But, it does seem like people are waiting for it. Jaxx must know that we're coming for him, then."

"He has the town eating from his hand," Tabetha said. "They love him there. You really think he is making armaments under their nose?"

Sam nodded. "Armour too, most likely. Like he's arming a small force."

"And with his mind-altering serum," Evan said, "he does sound like the one responsible for the hidden army. If one truly does exist."

"That's right," Sam said, watching Evan closely.

James looked at them. "Ah, Tabettha? How do you know all of this?"

She turned away, almost as if embarrassed. "I..."

"Tabetha knows some people in high places," Sam cut in. "Old friends in Victory City."

James watched Sam and tried to read more into his words. There was something else he wasn't saying. Something that Tabettha shied away from.

"She's well liked," Sam added, as if that explained everything.

"It matters not how she procured the information," Evan said flatly, "only that she did collect it."

James shook his head and looked away, not wanting to rise to Evan. He turned to Sam.

"What have we gotten ourselves into? Red Guards; Sacre after us. If yours and Den's theory of someone abducting people from all over the galaxy, building their own secret army, is all correct, then this is really big. I mean, shouldn't we tell someone about it?"

"We don't know anything yet," Sam said. "Just have our suspicions. Once we have something to confirm, we can go to higher authorities."

"Right," James said.

He refocussed his thoughts, trying to make sense of it all. "So the dangerous arms dealer, who owns thousands of weapons and has numerous armed guards, knows that we're coming to find out what he's really up to? And we're just going to walk up to him?"

Sam refilled Hettie's glass before filling his own. The old lady sat there with a blank expression, appearing to pay no attention to them. "Our goal remains the same," Sam said. "We don't have to come to blows with Jaxx. Finding out what his intentions really are on planet is the most important thing we can do. Especially if Sacre are involved."

"Right," James snorted. "And we're going in with a few swords. Several hundred would be better. If only we could get people to work with us. Have our own army at our backs, like Jaxx has."

"You would enslave a people for your own cause?" Evan asked, turning to James.

James paused, seeing the severe look in Evan's eyes.

"Like that huntsman," Evan went on, "who would seek to enslave people for his own selfish needs? Or this Higerio Jaxx and his serum. That is the way of the hero that you are, James Island? It appears you are on the wrong side."

"Evan, I didn't mean..." James reeled at the tightness in Evan's hooded eyes.

Evan's fork clattered onto his plate, the sound ringing in the quiet room. "But you thought it. You considered the idea, even in jest."

James looked to Sam for support, but his friend remained silent, watching them both.

"I was not serious in any way," James told Evan firmly.

"No, and that is your problem, James Island, hero of the gods."

"It is a misunderstanding," Tabetha said, smiling uncomfortably.

"It is," Evan said. "A misunderstanding of the gods, that has led us to here."

James opened his mouth to apologise.

"No need for your apology," Evan interjected, as if knowing what he was going to say. "It is too late for that. We have been aimless for so long, and Sam was almost killed, because of you."

James froze. He couldn't bring himself to look at anyone, especially Sam.

"Only a coward would not reveal the truth of the Grillock Caves," Evan said, his breath sharp. "You do not tell Sam that you could have warned him. That you stood there, crippled with fear, and watched him get attacked from behind."

Silence filled the room. Nearby, the drone of a ticking clock could be heard.

James swallowed through a dry throat, staring uncomprehendingly at Evan. His heart jolted when he saw that even Tabetha's aunt was watching him, with startling lucidity.

He attempted to say something but his voice caught.

"It is hopeless," Evan said. "You are hopeless." He pushed himself away from the table.

James could only watch as Evan stomped out of the room. His confusion and embarrassment kept his eyes low, but he eventually looked up at Sam and Tabetha.

"It's okay, James," Sam said quietly. "It really is. You are not accountable for anything that has happened. Evan can be temperamental, you know that.."

James still could not speak. He shook his head and looked away.

It was meant to be a nice meal. Like a family.

He had ruined everything.

