

## **Chapter Twenty: Aftermath - Part One**

A blinding light filled Evan's vision. His skin tingled with an intense heat that washed over him.

As his senses and strength returned, he realised he was being lifted off the ground by the hot light, and rotating to a standing position.

Through the tendrils of light spiralling around him, the gravelly street of Toolin materialised. Audlin and the dark-skinned man were before him. Between them, James Island was swinging his sword. In an instant James blocked Audlin's sword and struck across the dark man's chest, then swung back and knocked Audlin's sword out from his hands.

Seeing the huntsman, a rush of anger rippled through Evan. He had seen enough of the racist hunter who wanted to imprison him. The swirling energy flashed ahead of him, powered by his anger. Beams of light shot out and struck Audlin and the dark-skinned man. They convulsed and cried out as the energy channelled through them, their skin turning a charred black, their clothes burning away. With concussive detonations, the burned remains of the men exploded in a shower of ash and blood. The flaky ashes swirled in the hot air and blew away.

His feet planted on the ground. The white energy ebbed and retreated. Evan blinked away the spots dancing in his vision, re-adjusting to the early morning light.

James's face glistened with sweat as he watched Evan with wide eyes.

Evan turned to the hammer-wielding adlaz standing over Sam. The bulky alien looked over the charred mounds that had been Audlin and the dark-skinned man, then dropped the hammer and raised his arms with hands spread. Across the street, the other reptile man helped his comrade up. They were both injured and bloodied, and could barely walk.

Across the street, Sam stirred and came to. He slowly rose to his feet, wincing and holding his bruised chest.

"You fellas get going," Sam said to the remaining three adlaz, pointing his chin down the road. "Before you go the same way as your boss."

Not needing any further incentive, the reptile men set off. They helped support each other as they hobbled away.

"And choose better employers next time," Sam called out to them, though his voice was weak and gravelly. He retrieved his sword from the ground and approached Evan and James.

James took a step closer to Evan, his voice shaking with fatigue and confusion. "Are... are you okay?"

Evan considered the question and assessed himself. There, somewhere inside, he could feel it. The demon inside him. A smile crept on his face when he felt the wilted, meek presence that had once troubled him so much. Now things would be different. Now that he had fully bound the demon to him and gained control over it.

James's heavy breaths were audible as he waited for a response.

Evan met his gaze. "Yes. Better now."

And he was. Much better. He saw how James had handled himself with two foes. Evan had to admit, James had held himself well. Something told Evan that James had protected his unconscious body. He could feel the care and support emanating from James.

Sam came to them, saying, "Everyone still in one piece?"

"Trouble just keeps finding us, doesn't it? James asked. He held a hand over a dark blood stain on his side, by his ribs.

Sam nodded, frowning as he looked them over.

"That was some hit," James said, gesturing to Sam.

Sam carefully lifted the front of his desert cloak, grimacing as he ran a hand over the purple bruising on his chest. "I may have cracked a rib or two. Or three. It's going to be a while before I can try and heal us. Once I recover myself. How about you, Evan?"

Evan shook his head. "Aye. No more sorcery for me, for a time."

"Looks like you've expended enough," Sam said, looking over the remains of ashes scattered on the ground. He brushed a hand over James's shoulder, wiping off a few flakes that had fallen on him.

"I..." Evan searched for a response. "I do not recall what happened. When I came to, I saw a light, and the men explode." This was mostly true, he told himself.

Sam seemed to consider this. "Well, that's all the trouble dealt with, anyhow. It's just unfortunate that it had to end that way for them."

Evan stared at the blackened ground, and the ashen remains that blew in the wind. What had he done? Moments earlier he had embraced an enemy and allowed the goodness in his heart to overcome its evil intentions. Loving his enemies like his parents had taught him. But this...

While Evan had been regaining consciousness, he had allowed his anger to get the better of him. But it was more than that. He had never conjured a power that could explode people before. That was a power beyond him. Or within him. The thought sent a shiver through him, and he had no doubt the demon felt it too.

James was watching him carefully. Evan could see the apprehension and discomfort in his face. James opened his mouth to say something, but Evan spoke first.

"The apology is mine. I crossed a line. I was wrong to doubt you. I know that now. Please accept my sincere apology."

James appeared dumbfounded a moment, before he relaxed and nodded. "I'm sorry, too."

Evan held a hand out and James shook it.

"Good lads," Sam said. "What say we find us those mousslos and get out of town?"

"Sounds good" James said.

The pouch Audlin had carried lay several feet away in the dirt. The one filled with gold that was meant to buy Evan's freedom. It must have dropped during the fight at some point. Sam stepped over and lifted it up, hefting it in his hand.

"At least one good thing came out of this," Sam said without a hint of mirth. He placed the pouch into his satchel and said, "Next drink is on Audlin, aye?"

Sam turned and gestured to the animal stalls and James followed him.

Evan held back. The golden sceptre remained on his belt, but it was his father's sword that drew his attention.

He paused when he came to it on the ground. The blade had changed colour. At first he thought it was a trick of the morning light, but then he was sure. Gone was the gleaming, polished silver metal, and in its place was a dull grey. Muted and cloudy. He gripped the gold and black handle—at least that remained the same—and moved the blade through the air. It no longer caught the light, and where it normally gleamed, it instead darkened.

Evan frowned thoughtfully, but understood what happened. The ebony blade that the demon wielded must have somehow fused with his own sword, and had altered its composition. A low thrumming emanated from the blade, its power tingling through Evan's arm. The fusion had strengthened the sword greatly, he could tell, and it was better for it. He told himself he would also be stronger, now he was fully connected to the demon.

He sheathed the sword over his back, adjusted his desert cloak, and made his way to his companions at the animal stalls.

Evan wondered what his parents would say. Their only son, joined with a demon. Charged with an ancient sceptre of unknown powers. Another thought came to him, and he shook his head with a smile.

It wasn't a case of him being possessed by a demon, but of him possessing a demon.

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"I don't think that merchant's coming back," James said to Sam.

"Looks like you might be right," Sam responded, stretching his head to see around the stalls. "I wouldn't come back if I was him, seeing the fight that just happened."

Evan came up to them. James noted the distant, uneasy look in his eyes. He saw that Evan was troubled, and told himself to check on him, later. Now their priority was to leave town.

A rattling of chains drew his attention back to Sam, who assessed the heavy lock on the chain that ran along the gate of the stalls.

"If there's no one around to object to this..." Sam said, letting the rest go unsaid as he drew his sword. He struck the lock and sent the heavy chain to the ground with a loud clatter that rang in the quiet air.

Shuffling feet came from behind them.

Evan was the first to spin around, with the golden sceptre raised.