

### **Chapter Thirty Three: Shortcomings - Part One**

Evan stood with Melida on the balcony outside her room. Their dinner had been a banquet; one so large it almost reminded Evan of the feasts they would have in his castle, when his parents had parties. Although of course nothing could match the royal extravagances of the King and Queen of Therapia when they wanted to impress. And neither could the food. Evan still had yet to find anything on this planet to his liking, and he wondered if he ever would.

He looked at the cheesebread pastry in his hand and frowned.

Melida smiled beside him, her large eyes gleaming in the warm light coming from her room. "Trust me, you might like this one." She had said she felt bad about him not eating much and had retrieved the pastry from the kitchens.

Evan took a small bite. It was not foul, or completely bland and tasteless. After a moment of chewing he met her eyes and gave a small shrug. "It will do. Thank you."

She beamed at him, leaned on the railing, and sipping on the sweet wine she had poured for them both. She had washed and straightened her hair that day, removing the usual wavy curls, and it now hung over her shoulders with a distinct green-black sheen. "Your friends are so nice," she said.

Evan nodded. "I am fortunate to be in good company."

While the dinner had gone well, Melida seemed to enjoy smaller company over a large group. She admitted a preference for keeping to herself, even though she loved spending time with people. When Evan had offered to allow her time to herself, she protested and said she didn't mind his company.

Melida breathed in the night air, smiling up at the starry sky. A warm breeze blew over them, ruffling the hem of her long dress. "I just love it up here, at this time of night," she said, turning to him. "It's so peaceful."

Evan looked out at the rolling dunes that faded into the dark horizon. All around them it looked as though they were held in a dark vacuum, caught in a bubble in time. Only the tiny lights of distant towns and mountain villages gave a hint of more out there.

"I love the moment the stars fill the sky," Melida went on. "You can see them better out here, than in a city where there's too much light."

The sky looked so different from Evan's homeland. Strange constellations, but also emptier and less colourful. He missed his moons and the defining markers that made up his region of space. The only sky he'd ever known.

"You seem distracted," Melida said after a moment, taking another sip of her wine. She attempted a casual air, but Evan heard the careful concern in her words.

He studied his own wine glass, lost in thought, and eventually said, "My fears are weighing me down." After a silence he added. "I worry what kind of future awaits me."

The future that awaited him. He couldn't tell her why Reisa's mind was broken, and how that was tied to his own future. For some reason. it didn't feel right for him to even say Reisa's name in Melida's company. He knew the future what lay before him; he had seen it on that fateful night in Moon Bay. But he would not bring himself to fully believe it.

He turned to her. "I feel like I am wasting my time here, becoming distracted in the affairs of a local criminal, while my people remain homeless and my land under a tyrants rule."

"You're still on the journey you set out for. It just looks a little different to what you expected"

She had responded so quickly and easily, but what did she know of his experiences and goals? Simply hearing someone's story did not make them understand. There was no one in the galaxy that could understand him.

"Steps towards my goal, correct," he said, not wanting to press the matter.

"I know you will do well, I can see it. I have a talent for these things." Melida sounded blissfully ignorant, like a child who could not understand the real difficulties of the world. A child's dream of believing in their talents.

He saw the look of shocked horror on Melida's face and realised he had scoffed audibly.

"I am sorry," he said, softening his voice. "You must understand that you could not know the extent of my journey, and what my failure would mean. I know you are just trying to help."

She continued to watch him. Her cheeks were flushed, perhaps from the wine. Perhaps from his insensitivity. But Evan was tired of being nice to make others happy. No one could understand what he was going through, and it had begun to dawn on him just how alone he was.

"You don't like me being honest," she said accusingly.

He tried to smile to lighten the situation. "You speak your mind, whenever you like. It is an admirable trait, but not for everyone's tastes, I imagine."

She made a sound that came across as a strained laugh. "The same could be said for you, you know that?" Evan paled at the hard edge in her voice; a tone he had not heard from her before. "You know, we're not so different, you and me. Maybe you don't see that, but I do. And... I know more about magic than you." Her last words carried a hint of light taunting.

Evan shook his head and said, "Perhaps." He recognised the outspoken trait of his. It was something others had said about him.

"It's not so easy to see your shortcomings in others," she said, her voice still tight.

"You are correct," Evan said, "on all counts but one. I am sure you are a very gifted sorceress, although it is hard to match a Voarn with sorcery, I am sure you will find."

"Really," she said challengingly. "It so happens that I've already seen where I can help you. I bet you that I can teach you something you didn't know you could do."

Evan raised a brow. "Interesting."

"And, if I do show you something new, then... then you finish the rest of that bread in one go."

Evan couldn't help but smile. "Accepted."

She fully faced him with eagerness in her eyes. "The way you conjure your magic, as you've explained, is to search for a spark inside you and use that to channel energy through you. As with many skills, your competence with it improves over time, with use. It's estimated there are over ten thousand ways of conjuring magic, but they all come from a similar source. An inner strength and understanding. And, some are quicker to conjure than others."

Evan held up the cheesebread. "Would you like some? I believe I will not be finishing it."

She smiled dryly and rolled her eyes. "Anyway. While you prefer to search within you, taking your time to build up your energy and carefully ignite your spark, there is a way to instead expel your magic in a great burst. Almost instantly. Now, it can be dangerous. Very dangerous for untrained users."

"Instantly conjuring sorcery?" Evan said, considering it. "I believe I do such things already. Such as wielding sorcery during combat."

"But that still requires a build up, correct?"

He tilted his head. "Possibly."

"You think too much. That's your problem. And you plan too much, and worry too much. If you opened yourself up more, allowed yourself to be more reactive and work on instinct, you could train yourself to do the same with your magic. Like, how some people in a conversation think about what they will say next, instead of really listening to what a person is saying."

He slowly nodded. "There is some sense to what you say."

"I think you know I'm right," she said.

"However, it does not prove what you say is true."

Melida raised a hand and clicked her fingers. A brilliant flame burst from her fingertips and flared in the night air. Heat rushed over them. An instant later the flame was gone, leaving a lingering warm air and dissipating smoke.

Evan blinked to adjust back to the dim light. He could not remember the last time he had seen a perfectly conjured energy like that. The power had been solid and cleanly delivered. And it had appeared with a click. Melida may have been taking time to channel the sorcery beforehand, of course, although it did appear to come without previous thought.

Without another word, he took a large bite of the cheesebread and then shoved the last bit in his mouth.

Melida chuckled softly. "What do you think of it now?"

Chewing, he found there was a strong smoky flavour he hadn't noticed before. One that strengthened and improved over time. He smiled as he finished.

"I believe that is the most delicious thing I have tasted in days," he said.

Melida clapped her hands lightly, bouncing with delight. "That is a heavily spiced bread. The strongest stuff we have here, and I even infused it with more hot peppers. I baked it myself."

"Did you really?" Evan asked, surprised. "That is very kind of you."

She smiled at him. "I wondered if you were just used to a richer palette on your home world. I read up a little about the Voarn while you were gone. Maybe the food you've tried so far has been too bland for your extra-strong tastes."

Evan thought on this. "Perhaps, although I have never considered our foods particularly rich. Tasty, of course, but not overly strong in any way."

"Maybe you wouldn't consider it rich. It would just be normal for you. And you wouldn't have a comparison to other foods until you came here. Our food probably tasted too bland or flavourless."

He considered that and nodded. Maybe she did know him better than he thought. "Perhaps you are right." He took a moment to enjoy the lingering after taste, smiling to himself. The bread had not tasted anything like the food from his homeland, but it felt good to enjoy eating something again.

A lingering whisper flowed around them, and it took him a moment to realise it was coming from within him. A mocking echo. It felt like they were being watched; that they weren't alone. It was a familiar feeling to him now, ever since he'd left Toolin.

He sighed and looked up at Melida, holding her gaze for a moment. "There is something I must tell you."

She watched him carefully, remaining silent.

"Something happened to me, recently," he began, and then searched for the right words. It was harder than he thought to explain his situation aloud, having spent so long with it internally. "On my journey to this planet, a wayward spirit became tangled... with me. Its essence had somehow become fused inside me." He watched her reaction but her expression did not change. "I was not able to remove it, and so I allowed it to fully join with me, so that I could gain control over it. This spirit, this... demon, is now a part of me. I feel it within me, and I fear that I may not have full control over it."

She nodded with understanding. "I know." Her voice had softened and her brows were tight with concern. "I mean... I've felt something. I wasn't sure what, but, I could see something. Like you were two people. Two shadows. I didn't know what it meant, but now it makes sense."

"You did not say anything?"

"I wasn't sure what to do about it yet. What does it mean? How does... it work?"

Evan shrugged a shoulder. "I do not know exactly, yet. Since I bound us together, it has not shown itself. I have felt it, at times, mostly when I wield sorcery. I believe it grows in power when I open myself to sorcery."

Her jaw tightened with unease. "That is troubling. You can control it? You think?"

Another half shrug. "I believe so. But, I cannot say for sure."

She nodded briskly, as if settling on the matter. "I will help you be sure. What do you know about it? What kind of demon is it? Where did it come from?"

Evan considered all those questions but didn't know where to start. He just wanted the demon gone.

"Have you spoken to it, properly?" she asked. "Do you know what it wants? Is there a way you can both be of help to each other?"

"Of help?" Evan said. "Melida, it is a *demon*, living *inside* me. I would do nothing for it but exorcize it, see it gone for good. And I would ask nothing from it. Ever."

She frowned, but her determination was still strong. "You said it was stronger when you used your magic--"

"Please do not interfere," he said quickly, a little too harshly. Her mouth snapped shut. "Please, I am sorry, but I did not tell you for you to interfere."

She scowled at him, though even in her hurt state she still looked soft and friendly. Like a doll.

"You told me because you want help with it," she said firmly. "Whether you realise that or not. And I can help you. Or I can try, at least. It's like your gift; the more you know about it the more power you have over it. Don't you see that? Would you rather ignore it while this demon finds a way to take over your body?"

Evan watched her closely; her pressed lips, her gleaming eyes, framed by her perfumed hair. He couldn't help but smile, which caused her brows to furrow. She was a determined girl, and seemed to care for him far greater than he had earned. He realised she had handled everything he had disclosed to her well enough so far, and was surprised at how much he had revealed to her already. Maybe he could trust her further. And maybe she could surprise him.

"What do you propose?" he said.

She relaxed but maintained her determined look. "I have a book, two books, that might be of help. And, there is a passage I want to show you that may relate to that golden sceptre of yours. We still need to find out where it came from and what it can do. And I need to show you how to speed up your magic summoning. Come on, we've got a lot to do."

He gestured for her to lead the way and followed her inside.