

## Chapter Thirty Six - Truth And Lies - Part Two

"Jaxx is on the move," Jorak said, frowning under his beard and folding his arms across his large chest.

Sam placed his cup down with a soft thud. "He knows we're coming for him today?"

"Don't know," Liana said. "Our scout near the iron forge says Jaxx is loading several transport ships. It looks like he's preparing a large-scale transfer."

"Then we leave now," Sam said, pushing himself away from the table and standing.

"Something has frightened Jaxx," Den said as he reached for his hover device. "He may know we intend to bring him in today, or he may just suspect he has drawn too much attention in town. We have to consider that he means to not come back."

"Our presence yesterday in the forge would not have helped," Evan said, nodding to Liana.

"It doesn't look good," Liana said, her shoulders tense and jaw tight. "He has dozens of guards out on display. The whole place is on high-alert. More than we've ever seen it. We're readying our crafts now to head out."

Sam rounded the table and came close to Liana. James stood up and noticed how weak his legs felt. All of this was happening so fast, he had to mentally get himself into confrontation mode. Into soldier mode.

"How many men do we have?" Sam asked.

Liana shook her head. "Not enough. We can spare twenty-five soldiers, leaving the bare minimum of staff here. But Jaxx has over a hundred armed men."

Jorak pointed his chin at Den. "Den and I will hold back here and keep an eye on the local casts, particularly the Red Guards and Lawmen's channels. So far Jaxx hasn't requested exit air with Hath-Ba or any other of the nearby space-ports, but then he's likely not interested in going through official and legal channels."

"We're going in for an attack?" Sam asked, looking troubled. "Has it come to that, now?"

"Jaxx may not give us any choice," Liana said. "We just need to bring him in and send him to the authorities. The Avancheon will take over from there."

"What do the Avancheon have to say about this?" Sam asked.

"They might actually finally be concerned," Jorak said, the hardness in his voice showing his contempt for the lack of support so far. "They're sending a small squadron. But Jaxx will likely be off-world by the time they get here. So, we're on our own."

Sam responded with a troubled frown, and a tense silence fell on the room.

Liana's face hardened. "Sam," she said. "I've had your old possessions taken to your sleeping quarters."

Sam nodded and met her eyes. "Thank you. But I won't need them." At Liana's tense stare, he added, "I've made my choice, and I have everything I need to move forward."

The air around them had electrified. James looked from one to the other. He guessed the old possessions were Sam's sword and grapple hook. Both Jorak and Den held grave expressions.

James considered saying something, but didn't know where to start. As far as Sam knew, James didn't know about his past war trauma. He felt that he would just make things worse if he tried to talk to Sam about it.

"Fine," Liana said, with venom behind the word. Her eyes locked onto James. The focus on him quickened his heart. "We need a few minutes to load up the ships and arm the men. Right now, I think James could do with a better weapon."

James looked down and saw he had left his sword by his bunk. Was he meant to have carried it on him at all times? His face must have registered something that made Liana smile slightly, and her eyes warmed. Despite their circumstances, it felt like a nice moment between them, although he was aware of the others in the room watching them.

"At least you understand the importance of being prepared," Liana said to James, though her words were obviously focused on Sam. "We'll meet the rest of you out by the loading bay."

"Very well," Sam said.

With that, they all went their separate ways. Sam spoke with Jorak and Den in the corridor as James followed Liana. They crossed a courtyard, the morning sun beating down on them, and approached a small building to the side.

James eyed Liana as she walked ahead of him, once again admiring her long-limbed and shapely form, accentuated by her close-fitting combat suit. With everything going on, her presence was a small comfort to him, and he felt better now it was just the two of them.

"You okay?" Liana asked as she swiped a card and entered a code on a keypad by the large double doors. "You were looking a little pale back there."

James worked moisture into his throat. "No, I'm fine. Really. Just didn't expect a big charge like this."

Pushing a door open, she led him into a square room with a distinct dusty, metallic odour. As fluorescent lights flickered into existence on the low ceiling, James stopped and stared at

the weaponry on display. Shelves were filled with pistols and rifles. Cabinets held knives, batons, and various bladed weapons. Larger rifles were hung on the far wall; some that looked devastating and very cumbersome to him. Despite their dusty surroundings, the weapons looked surprisingly well kept.

"None of us are ever really ready for a battle." Liana faced him as she back-stepped to a wall with hanging swords. "All we can really do is make sure we're prepared and know what we're up against. As for the former, I can help you with that."

She waved an arm over the display of swords. Though they were all sheathed in wooden or decorated leather scabbards, James could see that some of the blades were over a foot wide, and were far longer than the sword he had been carrying.

Liana pressed a button on a metal cabinet against the wall. A panel slid out, revealing a long drawer that contained a row of four stunning swords. These were even wider than the ones on the wall, and had no sheaths. The blades shone with a brilliant white or cream colouring, with some grey in the darker shades. The end of their long handles contained a diamond-shaped blade. James remembered seeing similar swords on display in the training chamber.

"These are Maldrinn's," Liana said. "A traditional Oneron sword. Some of the highest quality blades ever produced. Now these ones are slightly thinner, and slightly shorter than a sword a Master Oneron would wield, but they do well in the hands of a novice Soldier. This should serve you well."

James stared in awe at the powerful-looking blades. They looked far too large to wield. And yet, there was something that stirred within him when he looked upon them. Like they were calling to him. A part of him wanted to find out what it would be like to spar with the overly large swords; to feel the power from swinging them, and the damage they could inflict.

"I know it's corny," Liana went on, "but for me, a good, trusty blade is like a lover. Something you can depend on and rely on. Something that will have your back. And something that feels right in your arms. There's a strong bond between soldier and blade."

James nodded. Was that why she had such a problem with Sam not taking up his old sword? He had heard that a grapple hook was like an extension of an Oneron, but had never thought about them having a bond with their sword.

"That would be nice thing," he said softly, eyes still on the swords. He was hardly aware of his words, but realised there had been wistfulness in his voice, and that same pang of loneliness hit him again. "I mean, it sounds good to have a sword to rely on," he added, clearing his throat.

Liana had that troubled look that made it seem like she was in pain. She took a step closer to him. "We all need things we can rely on."

They stared at each other for a time. James felt his heart race as he studied her enthralling dark eyes.

Liana turned and pulled the closest sword out of its holding, then placed it point-first on the ground and leaned on the long, black and white striped handle. The wide cross-guard had a green sheen to the polished metal. The main blade was a solid white that seemed far too bright for a sword.

Liana extended her arm and held the handle out to him.

"Try the weight," she said.

He took the sword and hefted it in both hands. It had a good weight to it and didn't seem as cumbersome as he'd thought, despite its size. The wide blade tapered at the end and had a slightly curved tip. The long knife at the end of the handle would take getting used to, he thought as he moved the sword through the air.

"Some things just feel right, don't they?" She smiled at him.

James lowered the sword. The feel of the weapon in his hands caused a rush of adrenaline through him, and his heart quickened. Liana's eyes held him close, and he felt himself draw closer to her. She seemed more inviting than she'd ever been. What was happening? Was there really a shine in her eyes and a parting of her lips?

"Do you have anyone close?" Liana asked casually. "Anyone missing you in Tyken Town?"

The question threw him off, but it didn't take him long to answer. "Just Tam, my old foreman. He was the only one I was close to." He thought about Annabel, the tavern girl he had been trying to get closer to. She had seemed to like him, most of the time. Now he knew that her moments of being guarded and distant were due to the spell over the town. James grimaced, thinking of his inability to really connect with anyone while that damned spell made him easy to forget. He held Liana's gaze.

Was he able to connect with someone now?

"I have a story," she said. "An old friend of an old friend, once met the love of his life while in the air." She chuckled lightly. "He was furiously late for an important appointment; I forget what it was. And the quickest way for an Oneron without a vehicle to travel is to jump. So he bounded through fields and hills, soaring through the air in great leaps as he made his way. And of course, once we're in the air, we're at the mercy of our trajectory and gravity. Especially without anything to swing from. So it was, that during one great jump, he was intercepted by another Oneron who happened to be jumping from a different direction. He collided with her in the air and they fell, locked together." She chuckled again. Her light, melodic laughter caused James to smile. "They eventually fell in love and have been together ever since."

"That's a nice story," James said.

"It goes to show that love can find you anywhere, whether you're looking or not."

They stood facing each other, the sword by James's side. He realised how close they were now. He forced himself to withdraw and look away. What was he thinking of doing? Getting closer would not be good right now for either of them.

"Right now I'd settle for a friend," James said. His hand tightened over the handle of the large sword. He managed to meet her eyes. "You know, this place is the closest I've felt to having a home. I know that sounds strange. But I'm glad I came here. And met you all. Especially you, Liana. I feel like I might finally have people that care about me."

She gave him a small smile that didn't reach her eyes. He watched as her smile faded into a frown and her brows tensed with a great discomfort.

"What is it?" he asked. "Something's been bothering you." It was a stupid statement, as they were all worried about heading to confront Jaxx. But somehow James felt there was more to it.

She shook her head, appearing to wrestle with her thoughts. He noticed her eyes were glistening with moisture.

"Liana, what is it?"

A long, soft sigh left her. "There's something you need to know."

He paused, unsure of what to expect.

Liana swallowed and looked around the room as if something could help her. Eventually she said, "I promised I wouldn't say anything. But you need to know the truth. Sam... he's been lying to you. But only because he thinks he's trying to protect you."

A numb sensation held James in place, catching his breath. His head began to throb as he took in Liana's words.

"You should know the truth, though," Liana continued, her eyes locked on him. "You and Sam were friends. Before your memory loss. You both knew each other well and were close friends."