

Chapter Five: Enemies In The Shadows - Part One

"Up there," Evan said, lifting his chin to one of the walls. A gap between the wall and ceiling showed a passageway that led into darkness. "I believe the snake came and went through there."

"Likely a better chance than heading back to that chasm," Sam said.

"Yes," James said eagerly. "Ah, yeah, we... shouldn't go back that way." He shuddered at recalling the inexplicable events in the collapsing chasm, and that dragon ghost.

"Very well," Evan said. "I will go first." He picked up a nearby chair and pressed it against the wall. Jumping off the chair, Evan pushed a foot against the wall and reached the ledge, pulling himself up and over.

"So much gold," James said thoughtfully, looking over the coins and jewellery scattered on the ground. It made him wonder what was in the chest that was threatening to be burned. The fire had almost burned through the long table, which had collapsed on one side, and a heavy smoke was starting to fill the room.

Sam reached towards a low shelf and collected a handful of coins and gems, giving James a mischievous look.

"No fears of the treasure being cursed?" James asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Bad luck seems to follow us, anyway," Sam told him with a shrug. He dropped the handful of treasure into his satchel.

James studied the gold coins at his feet, but something held him back from taking anything. While he didn't believe the items to be cursed, he also didn't want to be reminded of his time here with every purchase he made with them.

He stepped to the chair by the wall, and then sheepishly realised he didn't need it. At least Sam did not give him any teasing looks for thinking of using a chair to climb a ten foot wall. James focused and jumped up, easily reaching the edge.

The square passage was large enough for James to comfortably crawl through. Following Evan—who was short enough to crouch and walk—James came to the end of the passage and saw that it opened on the side of a large tunnel. He jumped down and dusted off his clothes.

The tunnel stretched into darkness in both directions. It looked wide enough to fit two trucks side by side, and the curved ceiling reached around fifteen feet. The walls were curved slightly also, giving the tunnel a cylindrical appearance.

"The wind blows from the right," Sam said after he landed. He carried a flaming piece of wood, possibly a table leg. "Our best bet is that direction."

James strained to feel any wind, before giving up and deciding to take Sam's word.

They made their way through the tunnel. James stretched and took in the calm moment, wincing slightly at the dull pain in his shoulder.

"Glad to see you in one piece," Sam said to Evan.

Evan nodded, his large eyes gleaming pools in the low light. "You have my thanks. I had no doubt we would be reunited. The gods look upon us even down here."

James frowned at Evan's words. The Voarn's devout religious beliefs always gave him an uncomfortable feeling. His unfaltering beliefs advocated a large, daunting world that James just couldn't fully accept as real. He had seen a lot of strange stuff in his time in Tyken Town, but nothing, not even the books he'd read, could fully confirm the belief of fate and destiny, or actual gods in the world. Evan had claimed to have met a god once, or maybe it was twice, but James wasn't sure how much he could believe that.

"What happened to you back there?" Sam asked Evan. "You left our camp?"

Evan appeared to think about his response. "I could not sleep. I felt the need for a walk, to clear the day's excitement, and did not realise how far into the caves I had ventured, before becoming lost. I vaguely remember something striking me in the dark, and I can only assume it was that creature who took me."

James nodded. "It certainly looks easy enough to get lost in here, aye. Just glad we found you in time. Strange you would have trouble sleeping, after the day we had. I was out as soon as I lay down."

"If you think that strange," Evan said curtly, "that would be a problem of yours, not mine."

James looked away from Evan's hard expression. *I guess he still doesn't like me.* He wondered how he could make amends with him, and knew the only way that Evan would like him is if he could be the hero Evan expected him to be. He still didn't know why some gods had told Evan that James could help him restore peace to the Voarn's homeland. A place James had no knowledge of. Up until yesterday James did not even know he was an Oneron soldier.

James watched Evan from the corner of his eye. His green tunic was scratched and muddied, and his trousers, tucked into long silver boots, was stained and worn. He might have look well presented at one point, but to James it seemed as though Evan had been wearing the same clothes for some time.

The large sword across Evan's back seemed far too heavy for his small frame. The Voarn sometimes seemed very young to him, like a hot-headed or sulking child. Other times Evan appeared very wise and experienced. He was a great swordsman and magic user, that was for sure. James just wished he could get along with him.

They continued walking for some time in the fire-lit tunnel. Sam and Evan spoke a little about the cave system they were in, but James had decided he had spoken enough for the moment.

A glint in the darkness ahead told James they were coming up to something. They approached a rock wall, gleaming with moisture. A dead-end.

There were two narrow crevices at the edges of the wall ahead, leading to either side.

A moving mass of long weeds became clearer in the fire light. A thick cluster of red vines were spread along the wall and at its base, writhing and twisting.

Sam held a hand up to his companions and they came to a stop. He stepped to check one of the side gaps, and then paused.

The tentacle-like vines shifted and curled away from the top of the wall, revealing two long stalks that stretched down. The end of the stalks held large balls, the size of watermelons. Scaly skin peeled back, revealing glistening eyeballs with large, dark rimmed pupils.

James's heart jumped at the sight.

The eyes looked them over, one lid raised and the other shifted down in a curious expression.

James's mouth opened with wonder. Keeping his eyes on the stalks, he asked Sam, "Have you ever seen such a thing?"

"It doesn't concern us," Sam said, his voice lowered with caution. "One of these side tunnels leads to the way out."

Evan eyed the vines with a hand half raised to his side, which told James that he was ready to draw his sword, or throw sorcery, at any moment.

As Sam approached the left side crevice, the vines shifted again. This time a third stalk rose up from the undergrowth, positioning itself just below the eyes. Instead of a ball, the end held a fleshy rim that opened and let out a sigh. An audible sigh. James was reminded of a suction cup or a plunger head, but was sure that he was looking at something very different.

The rim jerked and flapped as a high-pitched, gravelly voice said, "Options, options. Quite a predicament. Hmm."

James froze in place. He now saw the fleshy rim as a sort of thick-lipped mouth piece, and the shifting eye balls above it that gave the impression of a face.

Sam stepped closer to the plant creature. "Aye, a predicament we do have," he said.

The stalks became surprisingly animated as the eyelids rose and the mouth flapped. "Looking for the way out, no doubt. Unless..." the plant creature turned the word into a contemplative hiss. "New friends to play with?"

"The way out, yes," Sam said, keeping his voice light to match the casual tones of the mouth piece.

"Ha haaa!" Gravelly laughter bounced off the walls. "Very well, then. Way out it is. But which way? Two paths before them. One to the exit. One... to a room they would not wish to see."

"And which way leads to the exit?" Sam asked.

A vine positioned itself to rest under the frowning mouth piece as an eye lid rose. It hummed thoughtfully as it looked over them, projecting a distinct personality that James marvelled at. He still couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Share, share," the piercing voice said. "Something for us, something for them."

"What could we offer you?" Sam asked.

The mouth piece leaned closer to them, eye stalks following to maintain the face shape. "It has been *sooo* long since we were outside. So long since we have seen the sun. Felt the earth. Tasted its waters."

James had to wonder where this creature would have ever found water beyond the caves. Certainly not around the Carnan Sand Dunes.

"We would like something from the outside," the plant creature went on. "A token not to be found within these slimy walls. A reminder of what we are missing. Then... we will show you the way out. Yes."

James exchanged questioning looks with his companions. His first thoughts went to the tools in the toughlet compartments on his forearms. *Maybe a few screws or a multi-wrench would please this thing?*

Looking to Evan, he didn't think that the Voarn had any possessions other than his clothes and broadsword.

Sam brought a small device out of his satchel, holding his other hand high to keep the flaming wood away. "How about a sat-com? It allows us to speak to each other from far away, among several other uses. I'm sure there are none of these down here."

The eyes and mouth shifted side to side. A head shaking. "Metallic. Man-made. Unnatural. We desire... an object of nature."

James met Sam's eyes questioningly. A natural object... *What would we have on us? A blade of grass? Dirt on our sandals?* He got the unnerving feeling that this creature might be trying to trick them. How could they trust it really did know the way out?

Sam eventually said, "I'm afraid we don't have anything from nature with us. Can we interest you in anything else? A leather satchel? It's non-metallic."

The mouth grunted and shook again. "No deal." Its voice was lowered with menace this time, and James thought he sensed a hint of glee also.

"But, we have nothing else," James said, almost pleadingly. "We could bring something back for you, after you show us the way out? If you help us, we could then help you."

The plant creature appeared to consider this.

Evan reached into his tunic. Within the folds of his tunic he brought out a small leather pouch. He turned to the plant creature.

"Within this container," Evan said, "lays a sample of the earth of my homeland. A sacred earth that was tended with love and care for centuries. It is a treasured possession of mine. I assure you that its equal would not be found within these caves nor on any planet in this system."

James was shocked. That sounded like a very valuable possession to him. He didn't even know Evan had that pouch on him.

The eyes and mouth rose up, studying Evan curiously, before lowering close to him. Though it had no nose, it shifted near the pouch as if sniffing.

"Ahhh. It speaks the truth," the voice said. "A significant treasure, indeed. Let us feast on its succulence." The mouth piece opened, revealing tiny pointed teeth that lined the inner rim.

Evan raised a hand to tilt the pouch in, and then hesitated. Something passed over his eyes - longing, sorrow, James couldn't be sure- and then he threw the whole pouch into the mouth.

Elated sounds of nourishment emanated from the smacking lips of the mouth. "Oh, oh, the joy!"

James felt his stomach drop at the sight of the delighted plant creature, finding its ravenous hunger and thirst grotesque.

"Ahhh. That will keep us for a time." The vines around the face shape uncoiled and stiffened, giving James the bizarre impression that it was stretching. "Mmmm. Now, for our end of the deal." The face parts tilted to its right, towards the left side crevice. "The exit they seek is that way."

"Glad we could help each other," Sam said. He made a sideways nod to his companions and stepped towards the side gap.

James hesitated before following Sam. "Thank you for your help," he said, giving an uncomfortable nod to the bulbous eye stalks. Evan followed behind him.

The mouth corners creased up into a wide grin. "Pleasure, friends. Good friends of us. Yes. Resourceful friends. Come back soon."

The cratered rock glistened in the flickering fire light, throwing animated shadows in the small tunnel. The close walls and the hot air smothered James, and he began to sweat, forcing himself to steady his breathing.

Soon the gap widened and became a path that was comfortable to fit them all side by side. James decided that he'd had enough of cave and tunnels for a lifetime. They were only meant to take shelter from the sandstorm, and since then he'd faced a mountain-sized dragon and it's all-too-real vision, fought with and killed an actual grillock, jumped on a giant sand serpent, and just had a fairly civilised conversation with a plant.

The piece of wood in Sam's hands had burned down to glowing embers. He dropped what was left onto the hard rock ground and raised his hand. An open flame ignited in his palm, sending back the darkness surrounding them.
