

Chapter Twenty: Aftermath - Part Two

A man in a loose jumper and faded, frayed trousers stopped several feet away. He jerked back and raised his hands in the air. His round face held a flustered, wide-eyed expression.

"Ho-no, no," he said in a heavy Canarrian accent. "No, no. I mean no harm."

James thought the man looked familiar, but then a lot of Canarrian's had a similar red-skin, dark haired look.

Sam stepped forward. "Who goes there?"

"I-Castan. My-my name's Castan. I have no weapon." He kept his hands raised, his dark eyes on the sceptre Evan pointed at him.

James suddenly remembered where he had seen the man before. "You were in the tavern, earlier. We saw you arguing with the bartender."

The man gave a shaky nod, spilling a few curls onto his sweaty forehead. "Aye. Old friends we are, he and I. Just a misunderstanding, is all."

"What can we do for you?" Sam asked.

With his eyes darting between Evan's sceptre and Sam, the man said, "I could not help but overhear you with Dony-the mousslo owner. You said you were looking for passage to Riondon." He gulped as his eyes fell on the sceptre again. "I am a tour guide. Famed in these parts. I can get you to Riondon, in half the time you predicted. Keeping away from the main roads, of course."

Sam eyed the man. James sensed he was thinking the same thing as him. He wondered how much this man had overheard, and if he knew they had Red Guards looking for them.

"You've seen the danger that follows us," Sam said.

Castan lowered his elbows as he took a step forward, but kept his fingers spread at his sides. "And I have seen how you can handle the danger. Your company does not worry me. That hunter, Audlin, has been a nuisance in these parts for quite some time. Actually, a friend of mine owed him money. I did not wish such a fate for him, but I am glad he is gone."

Sam appeared to relax as he shifted his footing. Evan kept his sceptre raised.

"Tour guide, you say?" Sam asked.

Castan nodded again. "The best on Medropon. Lived here all my life. In fact, I dropped off a small group into town earlier, and was planning on leaving this morning, to find my next charge. Like an early start, I do."

"You know a quicker way through the Reshaavi Canyon?" Sam asked.

"The Reshaavi?" Castan scoffed. "You are clearly not from these parts, my friend. But, well, that was obvious enough. No, we can go over the dunes to the west, towards the foothills of the Dusk Mountains. A harder ride for the mousslos, but, much quicker than the Reshaavi. *If* you know the way through the hills."

Sam sheathed his sword. "Very well. Accepted. If that truly gets us to Riondon in half the time."

Castan raised three fingers, a smile creasing his pudgy face. "Three hours, with no stops. But perhaps the mousslos may need a rest. You folk look like you may need some rest time also."

Evan finally relaxed his stance and lowered the sceptre. "Your help would be appreciated," he said, though his voice was tight.

A mousslo stamped and moaned in the stalls. One of the animals approached the opened gate, its feet clapping on the hard earth.

"Here, let me," Castan said, jogging towards the stalls.

He went around the far side of the stalls, into the direction the merchant had gone. James peered around the corner to see what he was doing, but Castan soon returned. He carried a bundle of leather saddles with both hands, long straps and stirrups swinging with his steps.

"See, helping already," Castan said, stepping into the wooden stalls. He was obviously eager to please them and prove his worth. He dropped all but one of the saddles, and threw the heavy leather over the back of a mousslo and began securing it. The long-necked beast eyed him with an indifferent air, giving a low, wet huff. Its large, glistening eyes, positioned wide on the side of its head, watched him curiously

Their furry heads reached up to around nine or ten feet, stretched by their long necks, while their barrel-shaped torsos stood about five feet from the ground, supported by thin legs with knobbly knees.

Farther within the long stall, James saw three more mousslos, one standing and two sitting with their long front legs stretched out. Four mousslos for four travellers. He knew Evan would call it fate.

Sam picked up a saddle and approached one of the animals, which whinnied and rose onto its back legs, hitting its head on the corrugated metal roof. Castan stepped closer and raised an open palm, cooing in a soothing tone. With a low huff that sounded like a purr, the

animal calmed and lowered its head. Castan stroked the heavy mane of the beast, scratching behind a long, floppy ear.

"They can sense foreigners," Castan said with a crooked smile. "But they grow familiar quickly." He returned to tying the saddle on another. Whenever he met their eyes, he would flash them a smile and nod, which to James felt forced. It reminded him of the nervous smile that Tabetha would make when they first met her. Castan was clearly nervous around them, but eager to please.

Soon after, all mousslos held saddles and stood out in the street. The last to walk out was considerably smaller than the others, likely the youngest, and a perfect size for Evan. James spared a look to Evan, waiting for him to claim the smaller one, and even more sure that he would mention fate and something about the gods looking down on them favourably. But Evan remained quiet, maintaining a distracted expression.

Castan patted his mousslo's neck and stepped into the stirrup hanging low on the side. "One hand on the base of the neck. Left foot in, big push up, and swing your other leg over." He spoke as he moved, and positioned himself onto the mousslo. James guessed he was used to telling tourists how to ride a mousslo.

As Sam mounted, James eyed the beast next to him. He found it easy enough to push himself up and onto the beast, although grimaced when he overstretched his bloodied side. He checked under his desert cloak and found flaky blood came back on his hand. He would have to take it easy for a long while. He ran his fingers through the soft mane, which released a dusty, wooden smell, mixed with sweat and dirt. He attempted to project good thoughts and mentally soothe the beast, hoping it wouldn't kick him off or refuse to listen to him.

Evan mounted the younger mousslo in a swift motion.

"Naturals," Castan said cheerily. "Pull the reigns gently to the side you wish to go in. A little hop in your saddle will tell the mousslo to start walking. Not too hard."

The tension in James's shoulders and legs remained as he slowly led his mousslo forward, still unclear if he was in control of the animal, or if it was doing whatever it wanted.

"Like an ombraff," Evan said to them. "But with hair." His voice was light with humour. The comparison to the animal he knew of appeared to give him good spirits.

A slither of sun had cleared the far-off mountains when they turned their mounts away from town. A wash of red filled the horizon.

"Come," Castan said, turning his mount to the left, away from the main road. "Let us be gone before Scary Mary finds us."

"Scary Mary?" Evan asked.

Castan nodded. "First part of the tour: the story of Scary Mary. A crazy old lady who has lived in Toolin for many years, sometimes seen wandering the streets, and feared by many of the younger children. Some consider her a witch. But she does not know who she is, or where she came from. Mostly she just mumbles. People gave her the name of the town, and took to calling her Mary Toolin. But she is better known as Scary Mary."

Evan said, "A fine tale."

"Oh, we Canarrian's have many."

They moved down a low rise and the mousslos broke into a trot as the ground flattened. Sand and dust blew from the beast's clopping steps. With the sun now higher over the horizon, the warmth of the day enveloped them, pushing the cool night air away.

Despite the warmth, a chill ran through James. He considered Castan's story of Scary Mary. Another person with a lost memory. He thought of Tabetha's aunt, Hettie, and her degenerative condition. He hoped that whatever magic had saved his life and caused his memory loss would not have any long-lasting effects. He considered the idea of his mind fading. Slowly losing the person he was. His stomach dropped as another shiver went through him. What if he had a future with a failing mind? He forced himself to shake the thoughts away.

Castan went into another story that came to him, one about a local ice merchant who was known to occasionally help lawmen solve difficult crimes.

James fell into thought.

Den Keenosh's words echoed through his mind. *You owe it to yourself, son.* He swallowed and looked to the sandy rocks and dunes ahead. The rising sun gave him strength, and he reminded himself to make the most of the opportunity to be his own person. To get back on track to be the person he was always meant to be.

After all, he had come a long way in just a few days. He carried a sword now, and had survived a number of fights and near-death experiences, which included fighting a cave full of monsters. Den's piercing blue eyes came to him, followed by Tam's stern, grumpy expression. Without purposely thinking of her, Tabetha's heart-shaped face also came to him. Her heavy lidded eyes and toothy smile lightened his heart. He was thankful for all the people that had become important to him. That had looked out for him and cared for him. Maybe there were many more people out there that would care for him too. He brushed a hand over the grapple hook hanging on his belt, thinking that his father was out there, somewhere. He would meet him again. Meet him for the first time. James was sure of it.

The mousslo stirred beneath him, bringing his focus back to riding. A cluster of birds scattered overhead, black shapes against the bright orange sky.

After some time of travelling through the rocky dunes—the town of Toolin now a blurry mound in the distance—a rumble of thunder reached them in the wind.

James looked over the sky, seeing a few clouds, but mostly it was clear.

"We are not due another storm," Castan said quietly.

Evan's mousslo stirred and whinnied. Another rumble echoed through the sky. They all searched for the source of the thunder.

"There," Evan said, pointing up.

A dark smudge moved through the sky. Likely a ship entering the atmosphere. James squinted to identify it, seeing it was lowering towards them.

"What is that?" Evan asked, his voice low with wonder.

Of course it's coming for us, *James thought glumly*. Why wouldn't a random craft come to us? All kinds of trouble seems to find us, anyway.

But his heart jumped when he saw the object more clearly. The whine of the small craft's engines stopped, as did the trailing smoke, and from it unfolded wings. Large, scaled wings, that now flapped as the thing soared down towards them.

Protruding arms and legs became clearer as the large object crashed into the ground several feet away, throwing out a cloud of sand and dust.

The mousslos cried out and strained under the reigns, their riders attempting to hold them in place.

James's heart raced as the dust cloud dispersed. What appeared to be a giant dragon rose up onto stubby legs, reaching up to what must have been over thirty feet.

Metallic armour covered its chest and shoulders, and a brown cloth hung from a thick belt on its waist. Heavy gauntlets covered its forearms, though its clawed hands and feet were bare. What looked like goggles was strapped around its head, positioned over its long snout. A large metallic backpack could be seen over its shoulders.

James swallowed through a dry throat. His stomach lurched when he realised that this dragon had just entered the atmosphere with a rocket pack.

The dragon's chest heaved as it looked upon them, protruding brows down-turned in a heavy frown.