

Chapter Thirty Seven: Consequences - Part Two

Sam eyed him for a time, deciding if he should smack Castan or simply walk away. The man was a broken mess.

"We're done," Sam said. "Castan, I don't have time for your problems. And I won't make them my problems. We have bigger things to deal with than your bad judgement."

"I know, I know," Castan said quickly. "I know I messed up, bad. But I have nothing left. That's why I'm here. I've been going up and down these streets all morning waiting for you fellas to show up like you said you would. I'm here to help. I want to help."

Sam spared a look to his waiting companions and turned back to Castan. "What do you think this is? We're not sight-seeing. This is serious business. You can't help us, Castan. Just go home." He remembered that Castan had no home to go back to. His wife and son were dead. Sam sighed, feeling at a loss. He hated the hard edge to his own voice, and how it reminded him of his father.

"Please, Sam. I have nowhere else to go. You fellas are the closest I have to friends. I don't know what else to do."

Sam cursed under his breath and met Castan's eyes. "I'll deal with you later. You understand? But for now, we don't have time for any of this. We're going to bring Jaxx in, and that means a fight. All I need you to do is stay back. Far back. Okay? Under no circumstances are you to approach the iron forge."

Castan gave him a smile that creased his features. "I never deserved to meet you, Sam. Thank you."

Sam shook his head and headed back to James and Evan. There was far too much going on for him. His focus had to remain on Jaxx.

"Everything okay?" James asked.

"Oh, sure," Castan said. "To be honest I just built up a little loss in the casino, and I was hoping Sam could help me even it out."

"Oh," James said. "Yeah, I'm sure we can all help cover it, if it's not too much?"

Castan smiled greatly. "You are all good people."

"Our paths were meant to cross again," Evan said to Castan. "That is for a good reason. I have no doubt."

Sam guessed that if Evan passed a stranger in the street, and then saw the same person when he walked back down the street, he would consider it fate to see them again. He nodded briskly ahead. "Enough. Let's go."

As they walked, he explained to them that Castan would go as far as the end of the next street. James insisted on giving Castan his sat-com, and told him the code to call the Oneron outpost, if he needed to. Sam refrained from arguing against it. He began to feel like they would need all the help they could get.

Sam searched the streets as they walked, a part of him expecting to see Red Guards or armed men rushing towards them at any moment. He spared a glance at Evan beside him, and saw the Voarn was staring at him hard. As if he were trying to see through him. He had a distant look on him, like he wasn't even seeing Sam at all. Sam shook his head again as he turned away from Evan, trying not to think about it.

The heat of the day was smothering; causing a light sheen of sweat over Sam. Like Toolin, Riondon was not as protected against the desert sun as Tyken Town was. They came to the point where Castan would stay back, on a corner by a short building, two streets over from where they would head out into the open by the forge. Castan wished them luck, watching them with uneasy eyes as they left him. Sam focused ahead, his hands balled into loose fists, ready for anything.

They rounded a brick building and came out into the large open area, covering around sixty feet to the forge. The main tower loomed ahead, with the two connected shorter towers either side of it. The gravelled ground crunched under their boots.

Armoured men stood at various points around the grounds, carrying rifles or staffs slung over their backs. Some wore the black and silver armour of Sacre uniforms. Most wore their own variations of heavy and light armour under loose clothing or close-fitting under armour – a mix of different men coming together under Jaxx's orders. They had yet to determine if the men were all there willingly or if some, or all, were under the mind controlling serum Jaxx had developed. And that meant no casualties, Sam reminded himself. They couldn't risk killing people who weren't responsible for their actions.

Three large transport ships were stationed near the main entrance. Heavy crates on hover-carts were being loaded into the back of the bulky ships. Several guards carried out smaller crates and stacked them close together, beside a smaller aircraft.

The nearest guards were perhaps thirty feet away and had just started to walk towards them. Most other guards were closer to the main doors and the ships. Several more guards patrolled the outer walkways of the forge tower. Sam counted sixty of them at a quick glance.

"Sam," James said beside him as they slowly walked closer. "This is crazy."

"Just stay focused," Sam said. For all they knew, Liana's team were minutes away.

James walked on weak legs as the nearest guards approached them, their rifles raised. He was suddenly very nervous about drawing his sword. He should have practiced drawing it from over his shoulder before they got themselves in this situation. He tried to recall Liana's teachings about the Light Shield, hoping he was ready, and able, to call it if he needed to.

The closest guard was a stout man with dull grey armour over his shoulders and chest. He held a steely-eyed expression as he said, "The iron forge is closed today. This area is restricted."

Sam held his palms up defensively. "We have business with Higero Jaxx. He is expecting us. Please tell him the metal miners from Dendo are here. We spoke yesterday."

"Jaxx has no town business today," the closest guard said.

Another guard said, "We are ordered to escort anyone away. Remove yourselves, or you will be removed."

Sam held his hands out higher. "We mean no trouble. We just expected a meeting. Is Jaxx around?"

"Leave, metal miners," the second guard said sternly.

Movement near the transport ships drew their attention. James saw two people coming towards them. One was Higero Jaxx. He was as smartly dressed as the last time they saw him, in a highly polished dark suit that looked impressive on his powerful form. Beside him walked the shorter of his two bodyguards, the furry Firion. It made James wonder where the second bodyguard was.

A shiver ran through him. He had a sudden, inexplicable urge to run away; tell them all he was sorry but they had made a mistake with him, that he was not meant to be there among all these dangerous and skilled people. A voice inside him – perhaps Liana's voice – told him to stop, and focus

"The folk with the unlimited supply of ore," Jaxx said as he approached. His soft voice was a stark contrast to the gruff tones of the guards. It gave a false sense of security to their situation that made James even more nervous. "Indeed, you were expected. You two must be more business partners," he added, indicating Sam and Evan either side of James.

"This is quite a welcome party," Sam said lightly. "All this for us? I don't suppose you're loading supplies for us to take back to Dendo?"

"Delivered right to your door. Like you have done for me," Jaxx said. Off Sam's feigned confused look, he added, "Did you really think you could fool me? Coming to me as

interested partners? And now you bring the Voarn Prince with you. Your act is quite muddled, I must say."

"Our act is long over," Sam said, without the lightness.

James's pulse raced as Jaxx glared at them, half-smiling with a knowing look in his eyes.

"I looked into you all," Jaxx said. "I like to know who I am dealing with. And you are all *very* interesting folk. The famous Sam Hawkings, Brigadier General of the Daeyan Army Local. You haven't been seen for some time. It's a pleasure to meet you. And you, James Island, are perhaps the most interesting."

James tensed. He wondered where this information on him was, and if he could access it too.

"I have a word of warning for you, James," Jaxx said. "Your friends, Sam Hawkings and Denneron Keenosh, have been lying to you. They are working for Sacre, and have been manipulating you. They were not tasked to look over you in Tyken Town, James. They *kidnapped* you. They are using you as a sleeper agent, to do what Sacre want without you knowing. Don't you find it interesting how much they've been keeping from you? And why they are keeping your father from you?"

"That's enough," Sam said. "Don't listen to him James, you know us better than that."

James didn't know what to think. A powerful ache pounded his head. He searched Sam to try and see the truth, but he didn't know what to believe anymore.

"Does he?" Jaxx asked. "How well do you know your companions, James? I can tell you this much with honesty and certainty. There is a Sacre spy amongst you. I know this for a fact."

Sam had shown such reluctance at being an Oneron soldier again – was it because he was with Sacre now? When James awoke on that mountaintop outside of Tyken Town two years ago, maybe his enemies had found him first. And Evan; could he really have fabricated his story in order to get close to James, and then, what, antagonise him to keep him close?

"Sam," James said, his voice shaking. Sam had known him in the past. They had been friends. Or were they both soldiers of Sacre?

Sam shook his head firmly. "He's lying, James. Don't believe a word he says. You can trust me, I promise. You know that."

Do I? James thought, and almost voiced the words.

"James," Jaxx said. "I can tell you everything about your old life. I can help you get back to it better than Sam or any of the Oneron can. If you come with me, you can have all the answers you want. Nothing held back. I can help set you up with whatever new life you desire. All you have to do is enter one of those ships and come with me."

For a second, James surprised himself by actually considering the possibility of going with Jaxx. He knew it would be the wrong thing to do, and would never do it, but just for a moment, the idea almost seemed plausible.

"Jaxx tells the truth," Evan said. They all turned to him. "But he is also lying. I cannot say which words are which, however."

"Evan Goodheart," Jaxx said, grinning. His wide mouth stretched across his scaled face, red eyes gleaming in the bright sunlight. "You, young one, are a very interesting individual. You are looking for the Arbiter? The one who overthrew your kingdom? I know him. I can arrange a meeting with him."

James felt Evan tense beside him. He wondered if Evan could sense if that were the truth or not.

"Enough of this," Sam said. "There is a lot to say, Jaxx, but you're saying all the wrong things. You can tell your men to stop loading those ships. You aren't going anywhere. We haven't come here to fight; we just want to talk. We assure you that we will not interfere with the iron forge if you co-operate with us. As a sign of good will, we're requesting you come with us to settle what you're—"

"I will go nowhere," Jaxx interrupted. "You truly have no idea what you have entered. It makes little difference, however. You cannot stop what is happening." Jaxx stepped closer, his hands held behind him. "After tomorrow, none of this will matter. Doon is coming."

A chill ran through James, causing every muscle to tense. He knew that name, Doon. The warlord who almost killed him. Doon, the enemy of Hayden Island.

"You're working for Doon?" Sam asked. "Supplying him with weapons?"

"It's so simple for you, isn't it?" Jaxx said. "We'll keep things simple, then. Doon is coming, along with his Dark Sorcerer. Now they know where you are, James. You see, the Sacre spy among you has been feeding him information."

James's head throbbed, swirling with chaotic thoughts. A spy among them. That could be anyone. Evan could be working with Doon, not looking to restore his homeland at all. Sam could have joined Sacre after he turned his back on the Oneron armies. Even Castan could be a potential spy. A local man in the pocket of Sacre. That would account for why he insisted on staying with them. He thought of Liana and then dismissed her outright. He couldn't believe she would be a traitor

There was a Sacre Trigger Switch inside James's hand, and that led him down several possible conclusions. None of them good.

Sam said, "If Doon will be here tomorrow, why leave now?"

Jaxx grinned at him. "That's quite enough. None of it matters, anymore. Once I give the command, everyone here opens fire and the three of you will be no more. I am taking my belongings and leaving. This town no longer interests me. I have to thank you for making it this easy. I hardly expected you to walk right up to me."

"You'll have to explain that to the newscast cameras watching us right now," Sam said.

Jaxx paused slightly, before saying, "Even if that were true, I can control the news. I control this town."

"Either way, this is it," Sam said. "We're taking you with us, Jaxx. Willingly, or not."

Jaxx grinned at them. "This is pointless. You're already dead. And I agree, this is enough talk. Perhaps you were stalling for time, but, alas. You can forget about your Oneron coming to your rescue."

James tensed, and he felt Sam's alarm beside him.

Jaxx grinned again, clearly enjoying their stunned faces. "My men are heading to intercept their ships as we speak. You are on your own. No reinforcements for you." He tilted his head behind him and called out, "Discard of them."

Dozens of rifles turned on them. James's breath caught in a moment that seemed frozen in time. Then suddenly, everything ignited. The rifles fired in a thunderous assault.