

## Chapter Thirty Six: Truth And Lies - Part One

The distant mountains had gone from a hazy dark smear to a slowly defining silhouette, in the time Sam had been sitting outside. Their jagged outline was now cut against the rising sun, filling the world with a fierce heat. It would be a hot day today. And a long one.

Sam sipped a hot coffee, made by a soldier on an early shift, and felt himself slowly awaken. It contained a shot of boiled sagka, giving it an extra nutrient-dense boost. Despite his fatigue, he had been unable to sleep, his busy mind firing all night.

The small tejan cub stalked the rocky ground ahead, pouncing at insects and rolling in the dirt. Sam managed to smile at the innocence of the small creature, and its simple life.

Den's past life had constantly been on Sam's mind. He always seemed like such a strong minded and powerful person, yet had been hiding the remnants of a broken man. Despite it all, Sam had come to a decision about himself. His old sword and grapple hook still called to him, but their power had muted and dwindled, no longer affecting him the way they once did. And, he realised, he didn't need them to move on. *Possessions don't define me*, he told himself. *I am who I want to be, regardless of who people think I am.*

For one dark moment during the night, he even considered the possibility of changing his identity, like Raylan had, but soon realised that was going too far. It even made him realise that he should just find the strength to move on.

Others had been on his mind lately, too. Not just the five hundred and nine people he'd lost during the First Fire Wars. Sam had mentored a younger student in his final year at the Allied Starfield Academy, Rodi Richards. And it was Sam's fault for not being there with him during his first battle, which lead to Rodi's death. Charlie Roben had been left for dead because Sam couldn't shake off the enemy ships before he had to leave Dolcis's imploding moon. And Will... Sam had never been able to reconcile with King Arken's son before he was killed in combat; during a battle that Sam should never have allowed to happen.

And it all began with Sam's own brother, William. It almost seemed poetic that Sam's first and last charges to be killed shared the same name. And now, James was under his protection. All this time Sam had been secretly hoping for Hayden to return, or for Den to take over and allow Sam to just fade away with no more responsibility. Now, Sam really didn't know if he could be strong enough to keep James safe.

A numbing chill ran through him as he wondered if he was returning to the broken man he used to be. The man he was during his darkest days. Maybe he had just been pretending for so long.

He knew, deep down, that he couldn't back out of this fight. He was exactly where he was meant to be, and he was there because there was still a fight in him. His eyes welled up and he grimaced, fighting back the turmoil.

This was the way it would go. Sam could be a soldier again. Just not the one he once was.

He felt his shoulders relax a little, as if a weight had left him. A great burden he hadn't realised that had been tensing his neck and shoulders for so long. He could still be a soldier, and fight if he needed to. But that didn't mean he had to return to the man he used to be. He didn't have to be tied down to a military organisation, or hold a rank; he could live by his own rules.

Gravel shifted and someone slowly approached from the doorway behind him. Sam didn't need any special powers to know who it was. He composed himself, sipping his coffee, and looked up as Den Keenosh came into view, his metal brace quietly clanking.

"It's a hot one today," Den said, pressing against his hovering walking device.

"I was just thinking the same thing," Sam said. His voice was thick with restrained emotion.

The tejan cub moaned lazily and dropped to the ground, throwing up dirt. It yawned and closed its eyes, settling into a quiet purring state.

Den hobbled closer and sat himself on a fold-out chair.

"I have trouble believing it has only been four days since James Island came to my door," Den said. "And now here we are." His breaths left him in long wheezes.

Sam saw the years had been catching up to Den, now knowing he was much older than he thought he was. He wondered what Den must be thinking, but his chiselled and haggard face held his usual relaxed sternness.

"A lot has happened," Sam said, looking out at the landscape.

"And you, Sam? How do you feel about today? About moving forward?"

Keeping his eyes ahead, Sam said, "I can be a soldier again. Just not the one I was."

"I know you will do what's right," Den said, as if it was a simple thing.

"What about you?" Sam asked, turning to him. "What will you do now that our task of looking over James is done?"

Den made a half-shrug gesture. "Haven't thought much about it, to be honest. I'm taking each day as it goes for now. I was thinking of heading north to Ipan, to see my birth town. A part of me wants to reconnect a little to Raylan's origins. But, I'm not sure how I feel about that, yet."

Sam watched Den for a moment, trying not to be too obvious about it. After some time he sighed and said, "I really don't know how you – how Raylan – could have gone on after everything he went through."

"People are capable of handling a lot more than they think."

Sam thought on that. "I need to know," he said, almost pleadingly. The raw, desperate edge to his voice frightened him.

Den stared thoughtfully at the ground. His voice was barely a whisper when he said, "It was easy. There was nothing left of the man I was. I was born anew."

Just like Sam always wanted to be. Just like James was trying to be. A new person. A clean slate. But a fresh start didn't come from running away and starting a new life. What Sam was after was what Raylan - what Den - had figured out. A way to move on from the past.

They sat in silence, taking in the calm morning air. Sam finished his coffee, feeling another hit of caffeine go down.

Den adjusted his outstretched leg and turned to Sam. "I have been looking into Higerro Jaxx, with Jorak and his men. I must admit I am concerned. Jaxx is a very dangerous man, with some powerful connections. He is not someone to take head-on. Sam, take extra precaution today. I have no doubt there will be many surprises."

Sam nodded, and almost chuckled as a wave of dark humour took him. He wasn't sure if he could take many more surprises. "I will," he said. "Thank you. For everything."

Den patted Sam's thigh. "We have breakfast ready. I will leave you to yourself a moment."

Sam raised his empty cup. "I'm good to go. Breakfast sounds good." Although he wasn't hungry.

He helped Den to stand, and they made their way back into the outpost. A strange thought came to Sam as he held Den's elbow, easing him along. He had already begun to help someone.

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James Island made his way through the quiet corridors, adjusting his toughlets as he went. He was happy enough to be without his sword, knife, and grapple hook hanging on his belt, but the toughlets had never been an issue. He had woken up late, seeing it was already two hours past the morning bell, and wondered how he had slept for so long.

He tried to enjoy the peaceful moment, but his mind soon began overloading with anxious thoughts regarding the day.

The rest area was empty, and so he took the opposite doorway and headed towards the food hall. He opened the heavy double doors and saw Sam and Den sitting at a long table. Another table nearby contained the outpost manager Wellis, and the boys Edmund and Rossa, along with a young-looking girl in worn overalls with the sleeves rolled up.

"Good morning, James," Den said. "Just in time."

A door on the left side opened and Melida came out from the kitchens, with Evan close behind her. They carried trays with bowls and steaming pots.

"Just in time," Melida said cheerily, hurrying to the tables.

The closing doorway showed two soldiers in the kitchen working over large pots and pans. A server mech wheeled around the tables with glasses and drinks on its flat top. Evan took a seat at the end of the table with Sam and Den, beside Melida, and they began spooning the contents of the pots – a creamy, sweetly scented porridge – into the bowls and passed them around.

James found a canister of coffee and poured himself a cup, inhaling the strong roasted steam. On the other table, little Rossa was moaning that Edmund had been annoying him, and the older boy protested loudly.

Looking around the room at all the people, James realised there was one face missing.

"Castan left last night, then?" James asked as he sat next to Sam.

"That's right," Sam said. "We had a craft take him to Riondon."

"I never had a chance to say goodbye. Seems like he just disappeared."

"He didn't want to make a fuss over goodbyes," Sam said. "Wanted to just be on his way. Besides, he had a free night at the Midgan Casino waiting for him."

James nodded, almost to himself. "It was good to have him around, for a bit."

It had been refreshing to be around someone who wasn't a soldier or a fighter; someone who was just a cheerful man and pleasant company.

He noticed Melida passing Evan two small silver cans. Evan sprinkled their powdered contents generously, and a strong sugary smell wafted over the table as he stirred his porridge. The two of them seemed to have their own silent communication. And when they did speak, it was usually in quiet tones, meant just for them.

James was surprised to see Evan eating. The Voarn seemed to be in good spirits around Melida. A pang of pressure hit James in the chest, tightening his breath. He guessed it was loneliness. A longing for some kind of a connection with someone, like it looked like Evan had found with Melida. He thought of Liana.

Den finished a mouthful of coffee and turned to Evan. "Evan, I have news for you. I spoke with Jorak this morning. He has confirmed that the Avancheon Military are able to supply a small squadron to take you back to your home world, and they will set in motion a negotiation to take your land from its occupying forces."

For a moment, Evan stared at Den, as if struck with an overload of information that took him a moment to register. He smiled at Den, though there was still a great deal of tension on his face. "You will all have my eternal thanks. And I thank you, Den Keenosh. I believe your presence here has benefited my cause a great deal."

"I may have called in to a few old faces," Den said. "It is the least we can do, after you came all this way to find us. And you have been a great aid. Now, I can't promise any results, but I assure you we will do all we can to bring peace to your kingdom."

Evan nodded gratefully. "And so my time here will be over." He seemed like he would say more, but looked away in thought.

Evan had been saying for a while now that he wanted to go back home, but now they were talking about him actually leaving soon, James felt a deep sorrow build up inside him. He had wanted to do so much for Evan, even if he couldn't really say why. He had just wanted to help him. But, in the end, he was glad that the Oneron military would be able to lend a hand. They would be able to do far more than whatever James could have done for him.

An image came to James. Evan, back home, giving hell to whichever god it was that had sent him across the galaxy to find their saviour. The thought was one that James could hardly comprehend, but he knew that if there was anyone who could give a god a hard time, it would be Evan.

Melida expressed her happiness for Evan, rubbing his arm, and got up to fetch them some more coffee and juice.

The heavy doors opened and James turned to see Liana enter with Jorak.

"We have news," Liana said sternly, coming to a stop by their table. The tension in her body and serious expression were enough to alarm James.