

## **Chapter Thirty Two: Back In Training - Part Two**

"When we picture the source of Light inside us," she went on, "we need to clear our heads and focus with a singular determination."

"I'm not sure that makes sense."

She smiled, still holding his hand.

James thought back. "Sam said that the power came from the gods, and that we channelled it through our bodies. And.... that it took a lot of focus."

Liana nodded. "Right. But that's oversimplified. It takes a great strength of mind to wield magic. When we focus, we need to be wholly clear in our intent. Fully sure of ourselves and our actions. That is why the strongest magic user will spend as much time meditating as they do training. When you focus, you become aware of the channels you're tapping into and what they're doing to your body."

"And it's safe?" James asked. "Are there dangers with channelling magic?"

"With anything there are pros and cons, but magic is perfectly safe. It's how some people choose to use it that's a problem." She moved her hand over his forehead. "There are subtle differences between which magic you channel. Our shield comes from a Light source, and for this one I find it easier to picture the stimulus of love. Warmth and compassion. Those are the emotions that are derived from Light magic."

"Magic is emotionally driven?"

"It can be. Particularly more so with the darker and more aggressive magic's. Those tend to be easier to tap into, and stronger to wield if the user is truly corrupted." Liana stepped back and lowered her hands. "Now. Happy thoughts. Search yourself and look for the change in energy within you. Be fully clear in your intent. Close your eyes."

James closed his eyes and focused, his arm still held out. He checked himself and focused on what his body was telling him, searching for something he wasn't sure of.

"This is a protective shield," Liana was saying, her voice quieter, softer now. "It flows through you and manifests itself from the body's natural defences. It works on a molecular level, travels through you and extends itself outward."

James focused. Loving, warm thoughts. He considered that, and realised they were difficult emotions for him to picture. A pang struck his chest, thinking of the lack of love in his life. After a while he noticed Liana had stopped talking, and the room had fallen silent.

He opened an eye and saw she no longer stood beside him.

Liana suddenly lunged at him from the side and James startled back. He cried out as her fist came out, bringing his arm up to intercept her attack.

A disc of blue-white light suddenly burst over James's arm and her fist smacked into it. James stumbled back and fell against the wall. Liana stood over him, breathing heavily and smiling.

"Oh, and it works best on instinct," she said. Her smile broadened, flashing her teeth. "Good work, James. You got it first time."

"You're crazy," he said, standing up. "What if I didn't get it? You would've broken my arm."

Liana chuckled. She almost seemed child-like in her merriment. "I never even considered that for a second."

James rubbed his arm and checked his toughlet, seeing if anything looked or felt different. It was such a strange thing, to see a bright light come over his forearm, like he had held a shield.

A sly grin was on Liana's face.

James let out a laugh. "Well it worked."

She looked at the booth and then back at James. "The Switch Detector should have enough charge by now." She paused a moment to watch his expression. "Ready to see what it says?"

He nodded, unsure of doing or saying anything else.

She retrieved the device from the booth and came back to him. "I'm going to hold it over you, and it'll tell me if it finds any Trigger Switches. Just stand still. To be sure, I'll run it over all of you, not just your palm."

James straightened and stilled as Liana pointed the device at his legs. She focused on the screen he couldn't see, as the rectangular scanner roamed over him. It moved up over his body. He realised he was holding his breath when it pointed at his head. The scanner went up and down his left arm, then moved down his right arm. It reached his hand, and beeped.

James released a long breath. He wasn't surprised. There was a mixture of relief, at finally having an answer, and sudden dread, to consider the extent of what it meant.

Liana studied the display on the scanner. "It's a Trigger Switch, all right. But, it can't confirm the manufacturer. This has a database of all known Switches, and so your one is either somehow not on any official record, which is unlikely, or it's hidden itself from detection."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"It means whoever put that in you, wherever you got it from, it wasn't meant to be traced back to anywhere."

"But it has to be Sacre, right?" James said. "I mean, I fired one of their rifles."

"It might have been one of Jaxx's free-arm rifles. Or it might have been one of Sacres." Liana looked up at him. "It would be helpful if you could identify and bring back the type of rifle you fired."

"Right," James said, frowning. "I'll bring one back with me tomorrow."

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I know this is a lot to take in."

James swallowed and eventually nodded. "I know. I'm glad I met you, Liana. I know it's corny, but I don't feel so alone anymore, here in this outpost. You know?"

As she held his look, he could have sworn something that looked like pain, or a troubled thought, passed over her.

"Want to keep going?" she asked.

James considered that. "Is it strange that I'm not tired?"

"Well, if you have the drive to push yourself, why not keep going? Come on. Let's see you on the towers. We'll do a few jumps and swings before dinner."

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James washed the day away with a hot shower. He had finally begun to feel the draining effects of his vigorous training, despite his earlier renewed strength. He was surprised to have lasted this long, and figured that the physical labour at Rimas Complete had kept him in shape, at least.

The training with the grapple hook had gone well enough. He hadn't needed much advice about the jumps themselves. It was as everyone kept telling him, they were a natural part of himself, even if his mind had forgotten. Connecting to objects with his grapple hook had been a bit of a challenge, his confidence alternating between assuredness and self-loathing and back again. He had only fallen once, from a height of around thirty feet, and got up with a large bruise on his thigh and a scraped elbow. He could still feel the thrilling rush of wind over him from some of the greater swings.

James changed into a loose, sleeveless shirt and left the recreation quarters, making his way through the grey corridors. At this time of the early evening, a golden light streamed through the glassless windows he passed. He was beginning to learn his way around.

He passed by a glass door that look out at a small garden. Four walls surrounded the open area, which looked up at the evening sky. Feeling like getting a moment of air, James opened the sliding door and stepped out onto the paved walkway. Shrubs and sparse flowers covered most of the garden. Tiny insects chirped around him, and somewhere nearby a ventilation system whirred. The paved sections of the ground reminded him of the Time Grid, and he had to shake the feeling of adrenaline creeping up on him.

James looked up at the square of darkening orange sky above him. He breathed deeply and let out a long sigh, feeling his shoulders drop. He couldn't help but smile. Somehow, it felt like he was finally home. Surrounded by his own people; a place he could learn more about himself, and train to be a stronger soldier. It was a strange thought, as he hadn't been in the outpost long, but something just felt right being there. More so than he ever felt comfortable in Tyken Town. More than the cliff edge at the top of Mount Volton, his sanctuary, where he had first become conscious two years back. James had always considered that mountaintop his safe place, but now he had the outpost.

He reached into his back pocket and brought out the photo of the two soldiers. There must be a reason why his father had wanted him to have it; why he left it for James along with the grapple hook. The two soldiers, one with an arm around the other, smiled back at him once again. He turned it over and examined the back, but the thick card held no answers for him.

Staring at the image once more, he struggled to determine what it was meant to tell him. It was the shorter of the two, the one with the long fair hair and kind smile, that kept drawing James's attention. The man was someone called Jacob Roby, or so Den had told him. Someone who knew James's father. Maybe he was meant to find this man?

He noted the faint burn scar on his palm. The hand that also contained the unknown Trigger Switch. James had since wondered if the Switch was somehow to blame for his failed attempt at Fire magic. Would that mean he wouldn't be able to use magic well enough until he got the Switch removed, or learned how to work with both together?

A rustle came from behind. James startled and turned to see Castan standing in the open doorway.

"Oh, sorry to interrupt," Castan said, stepping closer.

"How goes it, Castan?" James asked, placing the photo back in his pocket.

Castan nodded as he looked around and came to a stop near James. His actions were calm and delicate, very different from his usual broad gestures and loud tones. "I know we've all spent a lot of time around people, and you probably want some time to yourself. But, I thought you could use some company."

"Of course. It's good to see you. Things have been moving so fast we haven't even had a chance to talk."

"Talking is good, but too much talking is bad." Castan stood with his hands held behind him. In the gloomy light his rough features looked carved from granite, despite his rounded stomach and curly hair softly moving in the air.

"How are you coping with everything?" James asked. "You shouldn't have got caught up with everyone chasing and shooting at us."

Castan made a shrug and headshake gesture. He smelt like hot meats and smoke. "I wouldn't want to be anywhere else. You know, you are all good people. I can see that. I am sure I've been trusted with being present for things that are far beyond my understanding, but I am thankful for being treated well by all."

"I'm just glad we haven't got you hurt," James said. It was good to have someone around who wasn't a seasoned soldier or a war hero. Someone who understood what it was like to be a normal person. A part of James envied Castan for having the option of going back to his life whenever he wanted.

Castan's voice remained soft, drawing James's full attention. "You know, James, I'm envious of you. You have a special gift. Your life starts from now, and you make the rules. *You* define who you are, not some past trauma or mistakes or bad times, or good times, that would interfere with you being who you are now."

James thought on this. "I wonder if it's better to have those memories of past mistakes, in order to learn from them and not repeat them."

"That's true. But I wish I could start again, start fresh right now, and be a new person." Castan smiled gravely, looking down. "It's a nice idea."

James saw the contrast with Castan. The light, friendly and cheery desert man, and the troubled person under the surface. He was beginning to see people a lot better, and it made him wonder just how dense he had been before.

"I get you, though," James said. "I know, despite my circumstances, I'm not in such a bad position. I just need to remember that."

Seeing Castan's concerned look made James pause. The Canarrian's belief in him stoked the fire James had started to feel. That he had been feeling for some time, but denying for so long. The fire that spurred him on in the training room. That spark that made him jump off the building to save Sam and Castan. James hadn't been able to pinpoint the source of that fire yet, but now he realised that it wasn't just about him. He wouldn't forge his own path just for himself, he would do it for the people he cared for, and for those who cared about him. He would be a stronger person in order to protect them. And in doing so, maybe he would find the person he truly was.

"I know you will find your own path," Castan said, looking up. His smile was more relaxed now.

"Castan," James said, "why did those men stop you in Riondon? Who were they?" He also wanted to know why Castan was still with them, and hadn't left to continue his tour guide services. Although they probably had the same answer, whatever it was.

Castan sighed and said, "I've made many mistakes. Sometimes they catch up with me. Sometimes I can keep running." His face hardened gravely. He looked like a different person in that moment; someone that almost frightened James. "If only we could start again, right?" He shook his head, his posture relaxing. "Nothing to concern yourself with, however. I am on the path to resolve my problems."

James gave Castan a sympathetic look. "If there's anything I can do to help, or Sam or anyone here, just let us know. Would you?"

The tension left Castan's eyes and he appeared cheerier. "I know this. Thank you."

They remained facing each other. James pointed his chin at the sliding door. "You joining us for dinner, or heading to the Midgan Casino?"

Castan's face brightened. "Both. I was just helping them with the dinner, and it looks amazing. After I will go to the casino hotel and have a second dinner there, and lounge like a lord in my own filth."

James couldn't help but chuckle. The sound was almost foreign to him, but it felt good. He needed to laugh more. He was very glad Castan was around. "Sounds good. Come on." He clapped a hand on Castan's shoulder and they re-entered the outpost, following the smell of food.