

## Chapter Twenty Six: The Best Laid Plans - Part Two

Liana shared a look with her father before she said, "We've discussed the plan, and have decided that we'll send someone to the Iron Forge while you fellas are with Jaxx."

Sam seemed to consider this, and eventually nodded. "As long as you can be covert, and not connect yourselves to us, or this outpost, then a quick infiltration shouldn't be a problem. Good idea, even."

"I would like to volunteer to go to the forge," Evan said, glancing around all the eyes on him. "I am the quietest, and smallest. I am the best suited for the task. And, my presence around Jaxx may lead to more questions than we would like. It seems that I can draw some unwanted attention to us."

James saw the tension in Evan's pained eyes as the Voarn looked away. That hunter, Audlin, must have affected Evan more than James realised. It was true, however, that Evan did seem to attract some attention. Although so far no one had sent a space dragon to kill *him*...

"That works well," Liana said. "We could use a Voarn's skills in the infiltration."

"Very good," Jorak said. "Aris will be going with you. He was selected to go already."

"Actually," Liana said. "There was a change of plan. I'm going to go instead of Aris."

Jorak's brows creased and he looked at his daughter with a hardened expression.

Liana held a hand up, pre-empting any protests from Jorak. "I want to go. I can't stay here while I send others out. Not this time. I want to help."

Jorak regarded her quietly. "Very well, if that's what you want."

Liana nodded, her face softening, as if she had been expecting a fight. She turned to Evan. "So I will go with you, Evan. You need someone who knows the land and can get us there and back."

Evan remained still a moment, his eyes tensing slightly, but eventually nodded. "Agreed."

Something about Evan's look gave James pause. He had seen similar looks from Evan before, as if the Voarn had a hundred thoughts running through his mind. Sometimes, it was almost as if Evan was looking at something. Something that James couldn't see.

Sam gestured over at Castan, getting his attention. "Tour guide, it looks as though you may be in need."

"Well," Castan said, raising his eyebrows. "This all sounds mighty exciting, I must say." His cheery expression hardened a little, his tone lowering as he said, "If I can help in any way, you have my services."

Sam smiled at him. "It seems as though James is in need of a business partner. You'd be a good addition when we meet Jaxx. A local Canarrian would make James look less suspicious and more authentic."

"Well," Castan said, "as inconspicuous as you folk can be with your swords, that is." He perked up. "And I get a trip to the casino out of it, too. So all good for me."

"Sam," Liana said sternly. "Are you sure about this?"

"I am," Sam said. "Castan will be well suited to meet with Jaxx. Isn't that right, Castan?"

The Canarrian nodded vigorously, looking over them all with a broad smile.

Sam smiled, ignoring the stern glare from Jorak. "Very well. So James and Castan will meet with Jaxx at the Midgan Casino. I'll go with them and stay back while the meeting takes place. Just in case anything goes wrong. Evan and Liana will infiltrate the iron forge and see what they can find."

"We have a craft waiting for you outside," Liana said.

Sam nodded again. "I just need a minute to clean up a bit," he said, pulling at his stained, dusty white shirt.

"Come," Liana said. "We have a changing room down the hall. We'll meet the rest of you outside in a few moments."

James thought he caught a look between Liana and Sam, as if there was something else spoken in that moment.

Jorak finally uncrossed his arms and gestured for them to follow him. "Come on, fellas. Let's get you moving."

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Sam studied his reflection. His new grey shirt was similar to his older one, and he had put his red sleeveless jacket back on. His long shorts were a worn mess but he could live with that. Having thrown water on his face and fixed his hair a little, he felt somewhat more refreshed.

Liana shifted behind him, sat on a bench in the locker room. He could see her watching him in the reflection of the tall mirror.

"I forgot to tell you," she said. "You'll never guess who lives in Riondon."

Sam looked over his shoulder at her.

Hot sunlight streamed into the long room through a window to the side, a square of light hitting the wall beside Liana.

"Calven Dell," Liana said, watching his reaction.

"Calven, really?" Sam raised an eyebrow. "Wow, of all the places he could end up." He hadn't thought about Calven for years, and had only seen him a handful of times since they graduated. "What are the chances that three students of the Allied Starfield Academy ended up within miles of each other?"

"You mean four students."

Sam spun on her. His face hardened with a glare that Liana wilted under. The air burned with a heavy tension as they faced each other.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly. "Three students. I know."

Sam stood a moment longer before nodding. He made the appearance of relaxing, though he was still highly tense and stressed.

"I hate having to lie," Liana said, her voice barely a whisper.

Sam paused, a shiver running through him. He couldn't even say anything to Liana out loud. Speaking the truth - the real truth he'd been keeping from James - was too much for him. She had been good not to say anything about it up to this point, but Sam still was not ready for that conversation.

Mastering himself, he met Liana's eyes and said, "I heard about Dulsten." Her pained look twisted his stomach. "Liana, I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

It was an obvious attempt to change the subject, and he hated himself for using her lost lover to shift the focus from himself.

She clasped her hands together, interlacing her fingers, and looked up at him with a tight jaw. "There was nothing we could do."

Sam sat down beside her. "It couldn't have been easy for you. He was a great man. One of the best we had."

She nodded dully. "He was brave and stupid. But that's why I loved him. Now all I can do is move on, keeping him in my heart. I just..." Her eyes shone with tears.

Sam grasped her hands and squeezed. "You know, do you remember when we took those water cannons and shot from the roof of the academy?"

She looked at him with a sad smile.

"We got Professor Roddick by accident," Sam went on. "Soaked him."

Liana chuckled, sniffing back the tears. "He was mortified."

"We ducked behind the edge, wondering if he saw us. And I said we should run for it."

Liana wiped her eye, smiling at the memory. "I said we should turn ourselves in and confess. It wasn't right to get an innocent bystander when we were just aiming at our friends. And the professor was always so gentle and nice."

"You were right," Sam said. "It was the right move. Roddick took pity on us and appreciated our honesty." They sat quietly for a moment, Liana softly breathing. "You always knew the right thing to do, Li. You were always the strongest of us. And things always worked out when you were around."

She swallowed and tried to compose herself. "Luckiana," she whispered.

The memory of Liana's old nickname - an amalgamation of Lucky Liana, on account of how situations would work themselves out if people went with what she suggested - brought a melancholic smile to Sam.

Liana turned and wrapped her arms around him, burying her face in his shoulder. "Oh, Sam," she said. "I've missed you."

"I've been away for too long," Sam said. And a part of him really meant it.

She smiled and nodded, and wiped the back of a hand over her eyes. "Ugh. I'm sorry. It's been a while since I was able to be myself in company."

"I'm glad you can still be yourself with me," Sam said. The two of them had always prided themselves on always being completely honest with each other, no matter what. It was a pact that Sam had only broken once.

Sam rubbed her shoulder and stood up. He collected his sword against the wall and began attaching it to his belt. He noticed Liana watching him in the mirror.

"You still insist on wearing you Rimas jacket," she said. "James reminds me of you, a little. He insisted on keeping his armbands on during training."

"They're called toughlets," Sam said, turning to her. "They're a connection to his old life. It's understandable that he's hesitant to let go of them. He still hasn't fully embraced his new life."

Liana studied him. A hint of sorrow passed over her tense brows, her mouth tightening. "In that case, you two are opposites."

Sam raised his brows. He feigned ignorance, though deep down he knew what she was referring to. She knew he'd been through hell after he left the military, and that he wasn't willing to go back to that life. So why was she attacking him?

"Sam," she said. "I know your old sword and grapple hook are here." She held a hand up as Sam opened his mouth. "I know you snuck in here two years ago, and gave them to my father, and then went to your new life in Tyken Town. Jorak thinks I don't know, but I know more than he thinks. But, I don't know why you had to keep it a secret from me."

Sam sighed, defeated. "I didn't want anyone to know I was here," he said. "I just wanted to get away from everything. I knew I couldn't keep my Oneron possessions and so I gave them to Jorak, and told him not to tell anyone. I'm sorry, Li, but I couldn't face seeing you, or anyone else who knew me. It was better for me to just disappear."

Liana pushed herself off the bench and faced him. "No Sam, it wasn't better. You just want to forget who you are and pretend to be someone else. But that can't happen. You'll always be Sam Hawkings. The man who always thought of others over himself. Who never gave up. The Hero of Lothkaal. The man who dove into an ocean on fire to save me. The man I care for."

"I can't be that man again," Sam said quietly. He met her eyes. "But I can *still* fight. I can be who I am now. Not who I was before. I've learned that."

Liana shook her head. "No, Sam. There is no other you, new or old. There's just you. Take your sword. Your brother would want you to have it."

Sam froze, his breath leaving him. His throat tightened, preventing any words.

"You can't hide who you are," Liana said softly.

"Just let me be, please," Sam whispered. He looked away, grimacing, unable to meet her eyes.

They stood in silence for a moment.

"And what about James?" she asked. "Can you let him be him? He showed me that photo he has, the one that came with his father's grapple hook. You lied to him about who it shows. Why didn't you tell him—"

Sam reeled on her. "That's enough," he said, a little too sternly. "I can't get into that now. Please, Li, just leave it alone."

"Fine," Liana eventually said, her jaw firmly set. "Sam, I'm here if you need me."

Sam turned around to look out the window. He saw the two boys from earlier, Edmund and Rossa, jabbing at each other with sticks. They swung the sticks like swords, parrying as they moved around each other.

The sight caused Sam to frown deeply. He thought of his brother, William, and how they used to play-fight like that when they were younger.

He shook the thought away, and refocused on the present. He had a lot of work to do, and it was going to be a very long day.