

## Chapter Twenty Five: A Soldier's Sorrow - Part Two

"Your Voarn friend is still with our Lady Melida," Jorak said. "As for your Canarrian, he complained of being famished and so we sent him to the kitchens."

James smiled. "Very good."

Liana brought out her sat-com and typed into it. The device was sleeker and more polished than the blocky coms James was used to seeing in Tyken Town, and looked far more advanced. "I'll have someone call Evan. And get your Castan. We don't have much longer before you'll be needed in Riondon. Shall we go? We'll meet them at the command table."

Sam readjusted the gun holster on his belt and nodded for them to lead the way, waiting for some space to free up before he could leave the weapons room.

They made their way down the corridor, surrounded by the cool metal walls lined with doors. Their steps echoed dimly on the hard floor, but Sam also heard a faster pattering of footfalls. Laughter and playful shouts came ahead, soon followed by two young boys rounding the corner towards them.

The larger one, a heavysset lad, looked to be in his early teens. He nudged the younger one playfully, who was little more than a toddler. Both boys had a blue-tint to their skin. The tejan cub they had seen earlier by the entrance ambled excitedly behind them, its paws scratching and sliding on the metal ground.

"Edmund, Rossa," Jorak barked. "Enough of that. Take it outside."

The boys skidded to a halt in front of them, their merriment and smiles shifting to wide-eyed expressions. The tejan yapped and reached up to them playfully, looking for attention.

"Sorry, Uncle," the older boy said. A giggle escaped him before he attempted to make his face more serious.

"Edmund said I couldn't catch him," the young one said, huffing and wheezing. Sam smiled down at the boy. He was still in his playful disposition and hadn't attempted to calm himself under Jorak's stern glare. "But I did. You all saw that."

Sam's smile became sorrowful. The boys looked to have around the same age difference as Sam had with his brother, William. His throat tightened at the thought of his brother.

Jorak gave the boys a stern look. "Outside, the both of you. See if Wellis needs a hand out back. Make yourselves useful, if that's possible."

The boys nodded and broke into a run past them, shoving each other again as they rounded another corner. The tejan cub scrambled into a run and took off after them.

"Soldiers in training?" Sam asked as they continued walking.

"They belong to Wellis, the outpost manager," Jorak said. "They're his sister's boys, but their parents passed two years back. Now he looks after them. Did you ever meet their father, Lester Panadris? You might have seen him here before."

"Simple Panadris. I met him a few times." Sam turned to James. "Lester had such an innate talent with everything – training, fighting, women, life – everything was simple for him. So he became known as Simple."

Jorak nodded. "The younger boy you saw, we call him Simple Junior. An exact copy, if I've ever seen one." He turned them down another corridor that led to the main control room. "Just a shame they had to bring that noisy cat with them too," Jorak added with a playful grumble.

Sam fell into a troubled thought. That younger one, Rossa, had been highly spirited. His youthful ignorance reminded Sam of how he had been, around that same age. Actually, he was older than them when he lost his brother William.

He followed the others, his focus blurring as pained memories consumed him.

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"So you can feel it too?" Melida asked.

She held the golden sceptre up to Evan, presenting it with both hands. He was sat beside her on a large, soft sofa in the side room of the greenhouse. The air was cooler in here, with a wide window open that let in the bright sunlight, casting half the room in shade.

Evan leaned his head closer to the sceptre, as if listening, and nodded. "It's energy has become somewhat more noticeable for me. The longer it has been in my possession." That was only a little lie, as he was unsure if what the thrumming he felt was from the sceptre, or from the demon inside him drawing closer to the sceptre. A part of him felt as though the two forces were opposing.

"And what do you make of it?" she asked.

"I am uncertain. There could be a great, dangerous force within. Or it may be a source of good, that has been misplaced. I have yet to determine which."

Melida lowered her arms and smiled at him. "Sound familiar?"

He looked at her and blinked.

She chuckled softly. "This thing is not so different from you, young prince."

"How so?" Evan asked, trying to find the answers in her mischievous dark eyes.

They had been speaking for some time and, encouraged by dozens of her questions, Evan had explained to Melida how he had come to Carnan, and became a part of Sam and James's journey. It had been refreshing, to tell of his travels, and struggles, to someone else.

Melida stroked a delicate hand across the jewels and intricate patterns of the sceptre. "It looks pretty on the outside. Like an item of royalty. And inside, a great power. Now, is it a power for good, or for bad? Only by getting to know it better can you determine that."

Evan raised his brow and gave her a curious look. "Did you say I look pretty?"

"Did you listen to the rest?" she said with mock exasperation.

Evan couldn't help but smile. "It sounds like an interesting observation. Though rather melodramatic."

"You are rather melodramatic," she said. "The fate of your people solely on your shoulders. A blood vengeance to a man who's name you may not even know."

"He called himself the Arbiter," Evan told her. "That is all I need to know."

"I know. I don't mean to make light of your situation at all. I.. what I'm saying is... that we can't know what's inside this sceptre, until we really get to know it. And I just feel that, that maybe that's what you should be doing for yourself, also."

"You seem to have a strong grasp of my character already, from the sounds of it."

The silent air felt alive with tension as they looked at one another. It troubled Evan that he could not detect anything from her. Either his gift had just not presented itself since he'd met Melida, or she had some way of blocking him. It was strange, he thought, how pleasant her company felt, and how relaxed he could be around her. It helped that she also had a keen interest in sorcery, like himself. And yet, Evan couldn't help but feel on guard around her.

Her large eyes softened as she gave him a small, comforting smile.

Evan let out a quiet sigh and looked away from her. "I do not belong with them. James and Sam. I..." He met her gaze. "I am unsure where I fit, any more."

"It's been, what, just a few months since your mother passed? And two years since you lost your father. And now you're on a strange, far-off planet, away from everyone you know. You're still trying to find your place in the world. Where you fit within yourself."

Evan found himself frowning. *Where you fit within yourself.* He couldn't help but think of the demon that had 'fit' inside himself. Maybe what she was really telling him, without realising it, was that he needed to learn more about the demon.

It was a dangerous thing, to not know what lay inside a person.

In a way, he was on the same journey of self discovery that James was on. Two paths running parallel, but separate.

He cast quick glances around the room and to the greenhouse beyond the doorway, confirming they were alone, and turned to Melida. "Earlier today, James Island conjured Fire sorcery. In a way, it was his first time, as his mind and body did not remember how to channel sorcery. When he eventually succeeded, it resulted in him burning his own hand. Rather badly."

Melida stared incredulously at him. "You must have been mistaken. Our magic does not affect us like that. Our hands do not get cold from Ice magic, or feel the jolt of Lightning as if we strike ourselves. James couldn't have burnt his own hand. The only way would be-

She paused, her eyes shifting minutely as she thought.

"Would be if the source did not come from him," Evan finished for her.

Melida frowned. "What do you mean? He was able to summon magic that didn't come from him? Where did it come from then?"

"When I wrapped my hands around his burned hand and expelled my Healing spell, I felt a sharp burst of... something. It was like being struck by a wave of crippling sorcery that shook my very foundations. I almost vomited. And it took me several moments to recover. A long time, to recover, in truth."

"Evan I don't know what you're trying to tell me." Melida looked worried now.

"I do not know what I am trying to tell you, either. I just know that the power I felt from James was..." He swallowed, finding his words. "It was dark. Corrupted. A black sorcery I have never felt before."

"I have trouble believing that," she told him, her tone warm and comforting. "Not after everything you've told me about James. And if he was truly something wicked, you would have no doubt sensed it within him already."

Evan knew she was right. That left only one other possibility. He had healed James after he'd connected the demon to himself. That dark power Evan had felt; maybe it was from the entity inside him. His stomach tightened at the realisation that perhaps his sorcery had become compromised. Maybe this demon had more of an effect on him that he'd anticipated.

"I think," Melida said. "That you should get to know James better. I mean, it sounds like you hardly know each other, despite what you've been through together. Speak to him more. Get to know him. And then you'll have a better idea about things. Trust me."

Evan nodded, though could not feel eased. "You are very optimistic, you know this?"

"Some people find that irritating," she said with a broad smile.

"I cannot imagine why," Evan said dryly.

He smiled as he regarded her, still caught in between feeling safe with her and being on guard, as though he should not have been revealing so much to her. A part of him wanted to trust her, he realised. He felt like he could tell Melida things he could not say to his companions. Things they wouldn't understand.

He opened his mouth and paused. Could he really tell her about the demon inside him? He didn't even know himself what the connection now meant. Maybe she could help him with that.

Doors opened nearby. Footsteps came from the greenhouse, and a second later an Oneron soldier appeared in the doorway.

"Apologies for the interruption," he said. "Captain Khallo requests our guest in the Command Room."