

Chapter Two: Whispers In The Dark - Part One

James Island awoke to a howling wind, roaring from beyond the dark cave. He sluggishly looked around, adjusting to the gloomy environment, and made sense of his surroundings. Sitting up, he stretched his sore muscles, joints cracking dully, and flexed his dirtied bare feet. A sharp pain pulsed in his ribs, taking his breath. *That's what jumping off a building gets you*, he thought glumly.

The pocketed rock walls of the cave curved up to a rough dome shape. A few feet away, a cluster of twigs and wooden shards had burned to embers and released a wispy smoke in the calm air. The dwindling light cast wavering shadows over the cratered rock formation. Behind James, the tunnel they had entered from curled into darkness, with another tunnel stretching out ahead of him.

Sam Hawkings slept beside the fire, his figure half-obscured by the hazy air over the embers.

Rubbing his sore side, James wondered how exactly he had ended up there, and was now travelling with two other people, Evan and Sam. It would take him some time to adjust to not being on his own any more. To trust and rely on other people. After two years as a construction worker in a strange city, with no memories or personal knowledge beyond his own name, James knew it would take him a while to get used to regular company. A part of him still wished he could be back in his home where he could keep his head down, although he knew it wasn't really his home. Just a place he had stayed in while he was in Tyken Town. Now he was free to find his own path in the world, and decide what kind of a person he wanted to be.

The wind howled incessantly from beyond the cave; a bestial moan. The sandstorm must not have passed yet. James reached for his water canister beside him and took a sip, unsure if they should be conserving their supplies.

His grapple hook shifted on his belt and thudded on the dirt. James regarded the handle thoughtfully; a possession of the father he supposedly had. Its silver and black engravings glinted in the low light. It should have been familiar to him, and yet it was just another thing he had no memory of.

Just yesterday - it felt a lot longer than that - James hadn't known if he had a past, or if he had awoken those two years earlier as a fully grown man. But he had learned that not only did he have a past, with a father that was out there somewhere, but that he was a soldier before. An Oneron soldier; which was meant to be a great warrior race of men.

The problem was that James couldn't have felt less like an experienced soldier. He had only ever known a simple life, and couldn't imagine fighting with a sword and throwing around magic.

James turned to where Evan slept. And found him gone.

Not a trace of the Voarn was left in the spot where he had fallen asleep.

"Sam," James called out, his voice catching. He cleared his throat and repeated the name, stronger this time.

Sam rose onto a straightened arm, his dark eyes darting to Evan's sleeping place. His short hair was dishevelled and had flattened on his forehead, but his eyes were alert and showed no signs of sleep.

"How long has he been missing?" Sam asked.

"I dunno. I just woke up and saw he was gone."

Sam seemed to consider this. Though he was around the same age as James - which James guessed to be late twenties - Sam had a harder edge to his countenance that made him look older. He stood up, dusting off his sleeveless jacket - which looked more brown in the low light than its vibrant red - and said, "His possessions are gone, too, suggesting he left of his own accord."

James strapped on his leather sandals and rose to his feet. His toughlets lay to the side, glinting from the ebbing light.

As he clasped the metal bands onto his forearms, James wondered if he should keep wearing them. They contained various screws and tools in separate compartments, and were designed to keep the items from rattling around. The idea was to have a small toolbox on each forearm, and while they did have some weight to them, James had never felt the toughlets were cumbersome. He was unsure if he was still technically an employee of Rimas Complete, but certainly wouldn't want to return to work and not have the storage bands with him, anyhow.

"Someone could have taken him," James suggested, adjusting the toughlets. "And taken his sword too."

Sam nodded. "But not likely his water canister. Evan leaving on his own might take water with him. Anyone snatching Evan away wouldn't care for the canister, and would possibly have killed us rather than left us alone."

James shuddered at the idea of someone coming and killing them in their sleep. He didn't want to think about *anyone* wanting to kill him.

"He hasn't been gone long," Sam went on.

How he could determine this, James did not know.

"Are you rested?" Sam asked, turning to him.

"Yes," James answered defensively. He didn't like the way the question sounded, as if Sam were an army general testing his new recruit. Although Sam was indeed a soldier, a fact that James was reminded of whenever Sam's usually amiable disposition hardened and showed a more troubled nature.

Sam slung his sword and satchel over his shoulder, and paused to listen to the wind outside. He glanced at the diminishing fire and then brought out a long sheet of wood from his satchel. James didn't know Sam had thought to bring along twigs and bits of wood, but he was thankful for it. Sam ran a hand over the top of the bark, his fingers leaving a red glow where they moved. Small tendrils of flames soon lapped gently over the wood.

James frowned thoughtfully, noting that Sam's hand showed no signs of burns. He still had to get used to being around magic like this.

"We'll have to search inside," Sam said.

"Into the caves?" James raised a brow. "The caves you told us to stay out of, no matter what?"

Sam shrugged, his wry grin illuminated by the glow of the flaming wood in his hand. "Aye." He walked towards the inner tunnel. "Come on, Isles. Some dark and scary caves are no bother for two Oneron soldiers." He spread his arms as he turned, as if asking *what's the worst that could happen?*

"Reassuring," James said. He suppressed a frown and decided to smile instead. He didn't want to reveal his fears in front of Sam; and he told himself Sam was right. He too was meant to be an experienced soldier. Or had been, once. Perhaps he would have to think like one before he could act like one.

He ran a hand over the knife sheath on his belt, willing himself to be strong, and followed Sam.

The cratered rock formation continued within the tunnel, which was wide enough to walk side by side. Through the light from Sam's torch, James could see the rock glistened somewhat, and beads of moisture bubbled on the tunnel roof.

Complete darkness loomed ahead, threatening anything.

James hoped Evan was okay. Since the Voarn had stumbled upon him yesterday, James couldn't help but feel like he was responsible for him. Evan was very far from his homeworld. Both his parents were dead. In a way, James had felt a connection to him and had hoped that Evan could understand what he was going through, being alone on a strange planet like James was.

It still baffled him why some gods had told Evan that James Island was his saviour; that James could help restore peace to Evan's overthrown land. James couldn't help but grimace

as he moved through the dark tunnel, turning away so Sam wouldn't see his discomfort. After discovering that James was a nobody - no great hero that was expected - Evan was furious, wondering why the gods had played a trick on him. He even called James an *empty shell*, he recalled with a shudder.

If anything happened to Evan, James didn't know if he would be able to forgive himself. A part of him wanted to prove Evan wrong, show him how strong and capable he really was, but James couldn't help but think he was as useless as he felt.

"What's on your mind?" Sam asked with a sideways look.

James couldn't begin to tell Sam what was on his mind, feeling like the very idea of voicing his thoughts gave him a headache. Instead James said, "If you can create fire from your hands, couldn't you just use your open palm as a light? Why use the wood?"

"I could," Sam said. "Although heating something and creating an open flame are two very different tricks; and I'd prefer to concentrate more on looking for Evan's tracks. Far less taxing than maintaining a fire."

They came to a rock wall, with the tunnel continuing on either side. Sam stood there, looking each way and studying the ground. Eventually he nodded to their right side, and they continued on.

"I'm sure Evan is fine," Sam said, as if sensing James's unease. "He's a strong little guy. And the grillocks hardly show themselves this close to the surface."

Sam had told them earlier of their surroundings, called the Grillock Caves. He mentioned the stories James had heard before: of the caves being home to the tall, ferocious beasts of shadow called grillocks. While some people considered them a myth, James's foreman, Tam, had told him the creatures were very real—Tam's grandfather had seen one—although there had been no reported sightings for several decades now, and the grillocks had become known as scary stories to stop children from venturing too far from Tyken Town's borders.

James gave a shaky nod, trying to look reassured. They continued on for a time, the air growing hotter and stuffier the farther they ventured into the tunnels.

"Tell me something, Sam," James said.