

Chapter Twenty Two: The Road Ahead - Part Two

Sam smiled. Something in his eyes shone.

"Well it must be as simple as jumping, right?" James said, with a hint of sarcasm. "I mean, so far everything I've tried hasn't been as bad as I thought. So maybe you're right. Maybe I just need to get over myself and give things a good try."

"It's all muscle memory," Sam said. "We just need to remind you how to channel magic."

Despite his determination, James couldn't help his pulse quickening. *This is just another step towards being the real me*, he told himself. *Like it or not, it has to be done*. A part of him wanted to show Evan how capable he really was. Another part, a deeper part, knew he would feel better after he showed himself he could do it.

"Okay then," James said, laying the book down.

"Whoa there, captain," Castan said, raising his arms. "What's this? No magic around here, if you please and thank you."

"A simple spell," Sam said, holding a hand up. "In a controlled environment supervised by highly experienced magic users. I assure you there's nothing to be afraid of."

Castan's face twisted into a frown, his eyes hardening. He maintained an amiable air about him, but there was something serious in him. It was the most sober James had seen the man.

"Right you are," Castan eventually said. He stood up. "About time for me to take a walk down the yellow trail, anyway. You fellas do your magic business while I'm gone, and I'll do my own business."

Castan waved to them and strode off, rounding some large rocks farther away.

"Yellow road?" James asked.

"He's gone for a piss," Sam said.

James chuckled.

"What sorcery was James familiar with before?" Evan asked, getting up and sitting closer to them.

Sam shrugged a shoulder. "I'm not sure of the extent, but Light for a certainty. Light is the main source of Oneron magic, although we learn many classes during our studies."

"Air is known to be the easiest for beginners," Evan said. James noted the eagerness in his large eyes.

"True," Sam said thoughtfully. "Although I've always thought that if someone can channel fire, they can channel almost anything."

"I suppose I agree," Evan said.

"Fire it is," Sam said.

James opened his mouth to argue, but caught himself. Holding back had become a habit, he realised. He needed to push himself. Eventually he nodded. "Fire it is."

Sam stood up and gestured for them to do the same.

"It should be interesting to hear of an Oneron's sorcery," Evan said as he stood, wiping dirt from his trousers. "I have read that channelling can deviate greatly between different users."

"Some arts can vary greatly between power sources and cultures, aye," Sam agreed. He turned to James. "Now James, as you may have read before, magic is derived from the power of gods, channelled into our mortal plane through the magical realms that exist around us. This is the common source for all magic users. Fire, for example, comes from the god Ossus, the First Flame."

"Or Thaenos, the Voarn Smith-Lord" Evan cut in. He gave Sam a wry smile. "Better to give a broader lesson."

"Of course," Sam said. "There are many higher beings in the galaxy, many of whom wield the godly powers. That's not to say that one deity is correct or one is not so, of course."

"No offense given," Evan said.

Sam nodded.

"Okay," James said, trying to keep up, "but how exactly do we... channel magic?"

"Through great focus," Evan said. He raised a palm into the air, facing up. "It is like a muscle. The more you use it, the stronger it gets, and the easier to find the focus." His fingers closed around a rock that seemed to materialise in his hand. He flipped the rock around his fingers and showed it to James, like a magician finishing a trick.

"It takes a great deal of physical and mental agility," Sam said, "a meeting of the two within the body. Now I know that's just the talk that teachers give. But in essence it's tapping into the energies in the atmosphere around us, and channelling that through us. Through our hands, conventionally."

"Okay, right," James said. "But my question remains the same."

Sam smiled. "Just try it. Focus on the element of fire as you know it, and feel the energy flow through you. It helps to picture the element you want to channel, to begin with. You've been through all the training, so this comes down to mostly just believing that you can do it. Like the Oneron Jump."

"Closing your eyes allows for easier focus," Evan said.

James shifted his weight and took a deep breath. Okay, you can do this. Whatever this is. Just focus.

He closed his eyes and held his hand out, pointing it away from them. At first he felt foolish, like they were going to play a prank on him while his eyes were closed. He focused and breathed. It felt strange to search inside himself, because he didn't really know what it meant to do that. Was it being aware of his body? His breathing? *Focus on the element of fire as you know it.*

"There is something inside you," Evan's said softly. "A spark that we access, through a great concentration. Look for it within you, and use it to channel into your hand."

It may have been the heat from the day, but James thought he did feel his body warm. A shivering, tingling sensation washed over him, down his arm. A throbbing energy thrummed in his ears and then the sensation vanished.

James opened his eyes and dropped his arm, sweat dripping down his face. He had been holding his breath, and now he gasped and composed himself.

"Try again," Sam said. His face was firm as he stood still, his arms folded across his chest. There was a disconcerting, judgemental look on him that James found himself wilting under.

James turned from the intense look and closed his eyes again. He searched for that warmth again, and soon found that thrumming energy in his ears. He fought through the increasing sensation, urging strength into his outstretched hand. It felt as though he was battling something, and he just had to be the stronger force.

A soft cry left him as he felt the flow of energy, a pulsing heat, channel into his hand. It was a strange sensation, feeling the warmth flow through him.

Then searing pain ignited in his palm.

His eyes shot open as blistering heat burst from his hand. James screamed at what he saw. A fierce flame covered his hand, burning through his skin.

Sam came to him and covered his hand with both of his. James fell to his knees, overwhelmed by the pain. His vision blurred. Sam dropped with him, his hands somehow

extinguishing the flames. A sickening smell of burnt flesh wafted in the air and made James gag.

He held up his shaking hand, and saw the seared flesh that blistered and oozed with blood. He was almost crying from the sheer pain. His hand was destroyed.

"S-Sam..." was all James could say. He could barely breathe, let alone speak.

"It's okay, James," Sam said, carefully taking his hand again. Sam's hands were ice cold compared to James's.

"The heat should not have affected the flesh," Evan muttered, his brows furrowed with confusion.

"It's okay," Sam repeated, pressing his cold hands more firmly against James's seared flesh.

James's eyes watered with pain. He swallowed and found strength in his voice. "What in Meth's name, Sam?"

"Just a little out of practice, is all," Sam said. "You'll be fine, I promise."

"*Fine?*" James spat. "Sam, look at my hand."

"I can fix it, don't worry," Sam insisted. "The flesh can be healed."

"It is the quickest to heal," Evan said. He seemed to snap out of his thoughts and quickly stepped forward. "Please, if you would allow me."

Sam locked eyes with James, waiting for an answer. James nodded and Sam released his hand, stepping back.

The heat returned immediately to his hand and James squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing.

"It is but a fleeting moment," Evan said calmly.

A dull green light grew from Evan's hands as he raised them. He carefully pressed James's hand between both of his, pulsing a soothing cool energy over the seared flesh. The pain dulled almost immediately, like a strong drug taking effect. The green light strengthened into a swirling ball of energy, causing James to look away as their hands became lost within the bright light. He lost all feeling in his hand, and for a second he wondered if it was even still there, somewhere within the light.

Evan suddenly screamed.

He jolted back, the green energy vanishing, and fell to the ground. He scrambled backwards, a hand pressed against his head and his eyes squeezed shut.

Sam rushed to him. He grabbed Evan's shoulders and attempted to calm him. Evan cried out some more before Sam shook him hard enough to get to him. Evan's eyes snapped open, a look of utter horror on him. His dirtied face shone with sweat.

James stood frozen, watching it all, his hand forgotten about.

"Evan," Sam said, his own breaths sharp. "Are you all right? Say something."

Catching his breath, Evan sat there, attempting to compose himself. He was trembling. He looked up at Sam, taking a moment before his eyes focused. "I am fine. I... I thought I felt something." He attempted to stand, and Sam helped him up. "It is a potential side effect of healing someone. There is a very small chance of taking on the other person's pain, during the connection of healing."

"I don't think I've heard of that before," Sam said. "Maybe it's from the Voarn's method of healing."

Evan rubbed his eyes and wiped the sweat from his face. "Perhaps, aye," he said weakly.

It was then that James noticed his hand. The skin had cleared almost completely. He tentatively flexed his fingers and made a fist. There was a faint scarring on his palm, that curled and bulged a little, and a dull throbbing remained.

Evan took a deep breath and collected himself. "Is there still pain?" he asked James. Sam remained beside him with a hand on his shoulder.

"No, not really," James said. "Are you sure you're okay? Was it...?" He looked down at his hand, but didn't quite know what he was asking.

"It was I," Evan said. "Not you."

"Been a while since I've seen a healing spell like that," Sam said. "That was impressive. I think it's safe to call you the healer among us, Evan."

Evan nodded, though he was still clearly troubled about something. James looked to Sam, but as usual he held a casual, hard-to-read expression.

James turned back to Evan. "What did you mean, Evan, that the fire shouldn't have affected the skin?"

Evan hesitated before responding. "I am sure it is nothing to be troubled by. A simple error in your first endeavour. Nothing to cause caution. I have seen it also in younger casters."

James knew that was a lie. He just knew it. He was sure that Sam was holding something back too, and the thought made him uneasy.

"Hell's bells, the smells of spells," a cheery voice said. Castan was walking towards them. "All done now, are we?" He noticed their tense expressions and paused. "Something wrong?"

"We were just finished, actually," Sam said. "All good."

Castan shook his head. "I half expected to find you all accidentally turned into baby brontoggs."

"No such luck," Sam said, smiling and clapping Castan on the shoulder. "Time to resume your services?"

"Right, right. We resume!"

James let Sam and Evan clear their possessions while he returned to his own mousslo. A part of him didn't trust using his hand so much, just yet, even though it seemed to be back to normal. He checked the edges of his toughlet, glad to see that no parts of the metal bands had been singed from the fire.

He was still shaking a little as he mounted his mousslo. His breathing had mostly returned to normal, but he still felt... off. Like something had changed with him. Was his breathing different? Chest tighter? He figured it was in his head, and that he shouldn't dwell too much on his failure. As Sam had said before, he should focus more on learning from his mistakes.

Castan led the way and they were off again.

Sam took his time to speak to James again, but he eventually rode his mousslo closer. "You're sure you're okay?"

James nodded, unsure of what to say.

"It's my fault," Sam said, sighing. "We don't fully know the extent of the spell that healed you. I didn't know what conjuring magic would do to you. There wasn't a rule book given to me."

"It's not your fault, Sam. It's mine. I should have tried better."

"There is no right or wrong way of trying," Sam said. "Well, of course there are wrong ways of trying something. You don't learn to sword fight by throwing yourself into a war, or learn to fly by jumping off a cliff. But, there is no real wrong way of trying. Because trying always beats not doing anything."

James considered this.

Sam studied the horizon, looking thoughtful. "We'll try again another time. You'll return to the man that you were, James. I promise."

They continued in silence.

Evan maintained a grimace as he rode, as if he was in pain, and still sweated profusely. James couldn't help but feel bad; that healing him had caused Evan so much discomfort.

James flexed his scarred hand. It may have been in his head but, somehow, it just didn't feel the same. And the thought worried him greatly.