

Chapter Thirty Seven: Consequences - Part One

Liana's words hit him with a paralysing force.

"Sam knew me." James's voice was hollow and flat, sounding miles away. The room began to tilt.

"I didn't want to be the one to tell you," Liana said. "Sam is convinced that you knowing too much about your past will somehow... hurt you. Or confuse you. I don't know. But I know you can handle it. You deserve to know the truth."

James felt his legs weaken and he had to steady himself with the sword.

"I just..." Liana said, struggling to find her words. "I know how lonely you've felt. I wanted you to know that there are people that do care about you. A lot. You're not alone."

Everyone had been lying to him this whole time. He suddenly felt very foolish. All this time everyone must have known that he and Sam were good friends, but had gone along with Sam's insistence that he not know about it.

What else had they been lying about?

One dull, muddled thought led to another, and James found himself pulling out the photo that had come with his father's grapple hook. The two men looked at him once again. One tall and dark haired, with serious eyes; the other with long fair hair and a sad smile. He swallowed, finding his voice.

"I'm going to ask you again," he said. "Who are the men in this photo?"

Liana frowned. "Please, James, just talk to Sam. He'll be able to explain better. About everything."

"Tell me," James said pleadingly.

Liana looked down at the photo and back at him with a troubled look. She pointed to the dark-haired man with the studded shoulder pads. "That's Harman Bridges. An ex-Sergeant of the Avancheon Military."

"And the other?"

Liana's conflicted expression remained as she said, "That's Hayden Island. Your father."

James's heart pounded in his ears, his senses fading. Everything blurred together. A sudden urge to vomit came over him. Jacob Roby. They had told him the other man was someone named Jacob Roby. Everyone had lied to him.

"I'm sorry, James," she said. "You had to know the truth."

James became aware of a presence nearby. He turned to see Sam standing in the doorway, a dark shape against the bright sunlight.

James froze, a shiver running through him.

Silence filled the room as they stared at each other.

A fierce anger shook James, his grip tightening on the large sword still in his hand.

"We were friends," James said, his voice trembling.

"James," Sam said. "I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't."

"We were friends?" James repeated. The words sounded strange, their meaning unknown.

Sam was glaring at Liana with venom in his eyes. She stood strong with her chin high.

"We can talk," Sam said, taking a step closer. "I can tell you everything. But not now—"

"Come on, Sam! You can't get out of this now. No more saving talks for another time."

Sam's body trembled and his hands were balled fists at his sides.

"It isn't the time," Sam said softly, as if it hurt him to say. "Right now, we have a mission. And that's all that matters. If Jaxx leaves before we can get to him, then he'll continue to grow his army and pose a great threat to the galaxy."

"To the galaxy!" James said, his voice rising with irritation. "What about me, Sam? You're so concerned about stopping an arms dealer but you never once thought to help me. A friend. You just wanted to keep lying to me so I would be your puppet that followed you along and did what you wanted."

"Sam is right," Liana whispered. "I'm sorry to put this on you now, James. I was just sick of lying to you. But Sam is right. We need to focus on Jaxx."

"You've done enough," Sam said sharply to Liana. His shoulders heaved with his heavy breaths. "James. Come with me now."

James hesitated, sparing a look at Liana.

"Now!" Sam shouted. His voice echoed in the room.

Liana gave James a very small, subtle nod, telling him he should go.

James let out a frustrated sigh and shook his head, then went to Sam.

"Liana," Sam said. His voice had dulled, losing his edge of emotion. When he looked at her, he just shook his head. His disappointment was clear.

"James had a right to know," she said defiantly.

"Of course," Sam said, "because you're always right. Always the victim."

Sam grabbed James by the elbow and shoved him out the door. James steadied himself as Sam marched out into the courtyard. Sam's sharp actions and demeanour worried James. He had never seen him like this.

"Look, James," Sam said, anger still in his voice. "Everyone's been telling me that we can't tell you too much. That it'll overload you. Everyone tells me what to do with you, what's best for you. I just didn't know what to do any more."

"Just talk to me, Sam! It's very simple. Just be honest."

Sam came to a stop in front of him. "Fine." His voice settled slightly, but his adrenaline was still up. He held his hands up, defeated. "We knew each other. We were friends. Good friends, I thought. We hadn't seen each other for a few years before you lost your memory. Our careers kept us moving and apart for a long while. But we were good friends. There you have it."

James wasn't sure who he was looking at any more. Sam suddenly felt like a stranger to him. At the doorway of the weapons room, Liana stood quietly, watching them.

"I turned my back on my military responsibilities," Sam went on, pacing agitatedly now. "I gave up on everything and just wanted to start a new life. A life where I hadn't killed hundreds of people. Where I could be a better person. When I found out about your injuries and memory loss, I volunteered to look over you. I wanted my old friend back, even if I couldn't really have him. And I wanted to hide away. I'm not the man I used to be, and I don't think I ever was. But that doesn't matter anymore because we can both be new people now. And we can be friends again."

Liana stepped closer to them.

Sam spun around, an outstretched hand pointing at her. "You stay away, Liana! Stay away from us. I should never have come back here. We don't want your help anymore."

"Come on, Sam," she said. "You're overreacting. The mission-"

"The mission is mine!" Sam said. "We can bring Jaxx in ourselves. We don't need you. And once we're done with him, then I'll be done with all of you."

Gravel shifted as Evan rounded the main building and came into the courtyard. He paused when he saw them. In his hands were James's grapple hook and knife.

"Den said to bring you these," Evan said to James cautiously.

"We're leaving," Sam said. He strode towards Evan, heading for the docking bay around the corner of the building. His heavy breaths were audible, a fire burning in him that James had not seen before.

James followed Sam with the others. The large sword suddenly felt unwieldy in his hand as he jogged after him.

Sam made his way to a craft parked in the docking area, besides a larger grey transport ship that had its back doors open. The craft was the same long and blocky model they had flown to Riondon the day before.

"You don't have to do this alone," Liana called to Sam. "My team will be right behind you."

Sam reached the pilot door, pulling it up, and stared at her over the roof. "No, Liana. I mean it. I don't want your help any more. James. Evan. In." He climbed in the seat, adjusting his sword as he went in, and slammed the door shut.

Evan held a confused look but he entered the other side of the ship and climbed into the back seat. Soldiers had gathered by the entrance to the building and stood watching them. One of them left and headed inside.

"Don't worry," Liana said to James, coming close to him. "Once we're ready we'll be right behind you. I promise."

The craft's engines roared to life.

James nodded to her, unsure of what else to say. There was a hard edge to Liana, he saw. A defiant look that told him she wasn't sorry for telling the truth. But she had lied to him so easily before, just like everyone else. In a way, he realised, he didn't know her that well at all. It seemed like the two of them had been getting closer, but that was while she had been keeping things from him. There was so much James wanted to say to her, but the urgency of the moment got the better of him, so he just nodded again and climbed into the passenger seat.

The craft rumbled as it lifted off the ground, then shot forward with a heavy jolt. James looked back at Liana standing there as they left the outpost and headed into the sand dunes.

Sam's mind was a mess. He should never have brought them to the Oneron outpost. He should have known better than to trust them with his burden. His anger rippled through him and he gripped the controls tight.

"This isn't over, Sam," James said beside him.

Sam sighed harshly, his pulse pounding in his ears. "I know. I know. I won't promise that I'll tell you everything when we have a chance, because you won't believe me, and honestly, I don't believe myself. But I will, James. I'm sick of keeping things from you. I haven't seen one sign that you can't handle knowing about your past. So, when we get back, I will tell you everything I know about you. I swear it."

James eventually nodded, though his frustration was clearly evident.

"Den suspects there may be a spy among us," Evan said from the back. His voice was calm and collected, a harsh cry from theirs. "He believes that is the reason Higero Jaxx intends to leave so suddenly."

"It's an idea," Sam said, trying to return his voice to normal.

"Can everyone in the outpost be truly trusted?" Evan asked.

A strained laugh burst from Sam. He sighed harshly and shook his head. "I don't even know how to answer that right now."

"As a traitor for Jaxx, I mean," Evan said.

Sam noticed that Evan no longer seemed so confused, and he hadn't asked any questions about his argument with Liana or why they had stormed off without the Oneron soldiers.

"No one in the outpost is working with Jaxx, Evan," Sam said.

"You can be certain?" Evan asked. "It has been some time since you were last there. Do you know everyone well?"

Sam couldn't begin to think about that question. Eventually he said, "I know enough."

He aimed the craft down a low dune, heading north-east for the iron forge. In the distance, the rough outline of Riondon could be seen through the hazy air of heat rising from the desert.

Evan handed James his grapple hook and knife. James's new sword – a Maldrinn Middle Class – sat awkwardly beside James, the long handle sticking out towards the back between him and Sam. Sam noted how the hilt-knife gleamed between them.

He called to Evan to search a box in the back for a holster, which would allow James to strap the sword across his back once they were out. Maldrinn's were never sheathed.

The sun had risen overhead by the time they arrived at the outskirts of town. Sam couldn't afford the time to park in the nearest docking bay, and had to risk gaining the attention of the Lawmen by leaving his ship several streets away from the iron forge without a permit. If anything, Lawmen and Red Guards coming might actually work in their favour. But all he knew for sure was that they needed to get to Jaxx as soon as possible.

He left the craft in a narrow side street between two buildings. A few people lingered nearby, though none looked for too long in their direction. They were a couple streets away from the area owned by Jaxx, which consisted of several abandoned or little-used buildings surrounding the forge.

James finished adjusting his new holster and seemed to be getting used to having the Maldrinn on his back. A Middle Class Maldrinn was about two-thirds the size of a full Maldrinn, but seeing James carrying the sword caused a sense of pride to well up in Sam. With the grapple hook on his belt and the sword on his back, he now more than ever looked like the man Sam once knew.

Sam breathed out softly. He had handled James all wrong. But that didn't give Liana the right to tell him what Sam had wanted kept hidden. When this was over, he promised himself he would trust James more to know about his past. Maybe Hayden had been wrong to assume that James knowing about his past would be a bad thing.

"You sure about this, Sam?" James asked.

"I'm not sure of anything, anymore," Sam said truthfully. "But we're better off without Liana's help."

"And all the guards with all the rifles?" James asked.

Sam led them onto a main road and headed east towards the iron forge. The area mostly consisted of dull brown buildings with few windows, and the more they walked the fewer people there seemed to be. Most were heading in the opposite direction, towards the nearest shuttle stops and the centre of town.

"We can handle them," was all Sam said.

He didn't know if he was leading them all to their deaths. He cursed himself for being so hot-headed with Liana. Had he overreacted? He shook his head, grimacing, and felt sweat run down his forehead. They could have gone in with a small army, but Sam had to be sure that the three of them could handle it.

Besides, now it was too late for anything else. He had made his choice and now all that mattered was getting to Jaxx before he disappeared.

Down the street, a figure rounded a corner, shrouded in the shadow of a building. At first Sam thought it was one of Jaxx's men, patrolling the surrounding area. Or maybe it was Liana's scout approaching them. But then he saw the figure held no weapon or armour, and instantly recognised him.

"Castan," James said, quickening his pace.

The Canarrian wore a dark suit with a white shirt, untucked and loosely buttoned. The suit would have made him appear presentable but he looked dishevelled and his curly hair was

a mess. Dark circles were under his eyes and he had a shaky, uneasy demeanour as he came to them.

"So, what's the plan?" Castan asked, smiling.

Sam eyed him carefully. The last he saw him, he'd told Castan that he never wanted to see him again.

"You okay?" James asked. "What happened to you?"

Castan waved his concerns away with a hand. "Had the night of my life, that's what happened. All the stories of the Midgan Hotel are true. Hoo boy!"

"We thought you'd be on your way," James said. "Or did you miss us?"

Castan's smile was uneasy. His blood-shot eyes shook as he regarded Sam. "Sam. Can I have a quick word?" He gestured his head to the side.

Sam sighed internally. They didn't have time for whatever Castan was up to. But he found himself stepping away from James and Evan.

"You have thirty seconds," Sam said, speaking low, once they were a good distance away.

Castan leaned closer to him. He stank of alcohol and sweat. He opened his mouth to speak, but then frowned deeply, his lips quivering. After some inaudible thinking sounds, he said, "Sam. Sam. I..." he swallowed and found the words he had trouble saying. "I messed up. Bad." Tears were almost in his eyes.

"You had the gold you wanted," Sam said. "Why are you still here?"

Castan grimaced, turning his back to James and Evan. "I... I thought I could bet some of it. Make more. It wasn't enough to cover my debts and so I thought I could win what I needed. And I did, for a while." He looked away.

Sam could see what Castan was getting to. "How much did you lose?"

Castan frowned. "All of it," he whispered.