

## **Chapter Twenty Eight: The Iron Forge - Part Two**

The worker remained frozen, his eyes flickering over them. He was perhaps in his fifties – Evan couldn't determine human ages very well – with grey hair and a powerful frame.

"Why would you have to hurt me?" the man asked, regaining some of his composure.

Evan couldn't read his thoughts - his gift wasn't present but even so he could tell the man was thinking fast while appearing relaxed.

"We just want to ask a few questions," Liana said. She lowered her sword slightly. "And if you answer them honestly we won't have any problems."

"Public relations are three floors below," the man said coolly.

"Well we're here now," Liana said, "might as well make ourselves comfortable. Now tell us, what goes on in these upper levels?"

A low humming of machinery was coming from beyond the room, seeming to come from all around. Evan looked over the banks of consoles, though the technology was mostly unfamiliar to him.

"You're from those campaigners," the grey-haired man said. "The ones that wrote those articles on us, not believing our full disclosure to the public."

"So you don't have anything to hide?" Liana asked.

"We've gone on record explaining our procedures here. We've been welcomed by most of the town, why can't you see we have no ill intentions?"

"You're stalling," Liana said. "What exactly is this control room for?"

Evan stepped closer to the large window, seeing more of the huge room beyond. "To oversee all this," he said quietly, taking in what he saw.

Liana said something to the man, and he went to the window beside Evan. Liana remained behind him at all times, her sword still on him. A silence fell over them as they looked out.

The room beyond was long and narrow, divided into six rows that ran the length of the room. Figures in protective clothing stood at the beginning of each row, their backs to them. They were firing rifles into holographic targets at the far end. Beams of blue light shot from some rifles, others firing yellow plasma bolts, along with more conventional bullets. A dozen feet above the firing range, a metal walkway, strung from the ceiling, led to a door on the far end.

"Just testing the wares?" Liana said, turning to the man. He remained resolute. "Looks like a lot of effort just for checks."

It must have been very loud in there, though Evan could only hear dull, muted sounds when he strained his ears to listen. The men with the rifles were not just firing at the targets. They moved swiftly, reloading and switching between firearms with great intent. A tall man in bulky armour walked up and down the ranks, gesturing as he called out to them.

"These are soldiers in training," Evan said, frowning.

"That's right," Liana said, eyeing the grey-haired man beside them. "These weapons are not meant for anyone else. Jaxx has his own private army."

*The hidden army*, Evan thought with a start, his heart racing.

"You cannot prove any of that," the man said with a defiant air.

"But your computer could," Liana said. The screen on the desk was facing them, and she only had to take three steps to see it better.

"Now that's confidential," the man said sternly. He attempted to move closer but Evan raised his sword. The man jolted to a stop, clearly looking flustered. "You have no right-"

"That's enough," Liana said forcefully. She pivoted on her heel and glared at the man. For a moment she was silent, as if stunned, her eyes shifting in thought. Her voice was awed, distant, when she said, "He actually did it."

"What is it?" Evan asked.

"Jaxx," Liana said. "He's making his armaments without Trigger Switches. It's right there on the console. He's daring to go against galactic laws and creating firearms for open use. Not many would dare touch these weapons, but that doesn't matter, as they're only for his soldiers. He's a mad man."

The grey-haired man protested some more and Liana held a hand up.

"I've seen enough," she said, stepping back to the console. "It's all here. And we're taking it." She brought out a small knife from her belt and dug it into the back of the console chassis. Sparks flew as she dug in and flicked the knife out, and withdrew a small black box. The monitor shut off. "We can look over this later. And be sure to share it with the Red Guards."

"It makes little difference what you know," the man said, the contempt clear on his face. "It's too late for you to leave here alive."

"Is that so?" Liana said.

"You see the door down there?" he asked, pointing to a door at the end of a walkway beyond the window. "Those flashing red lights over it? That's the silent alarm. The entire building has been locked down now and the guards are coming for you." He made a thinking sound and cocked an eyebrow. "Maybe I was stalling."

The door behind them slid open and six guards burst in. They spread out and raised rifles at them.

With her back to them, Liana pushed back and dove across the room. They opened fire. A bright disc of light appeared over her arm as she twisted in the air, the bullets thudding into it. Evan ducked down beside the grey-haired man. Liana struck two guards with her sword, planted a foot on another and pushed off into a fourth. Two more rifles fired, pelting the walls with bullets, but they were all too close to effectively shoot without hitting each other. Liana used that to her advantage, spinning and flipping through the guards, knocking their rifles away and cutting them down.

Evan gripped his sword, but the room was too crowded for him to enter the fight without possibly hurting Liana. The worker beside him retreated to the corner, ducking low as bullets hit the wall near him.

Evan turned to the large window and readied his sword, seeing no other course of action. He struck the glass, which cracked a little but mostly bounced his sword back. It was tougher than he thought. With the commotion behind him, Liana whipping between the guards and an occasional rifle going off, Evan struck the glass again. And again. Large cracks formed but the glass mostly held in place. Evan steadied his heavy breaths and prepared himself, focusing his sorcery internally. He cried out as he struck the glass, enhanced with a strong push of wind. The window shattered.

The deafening shots in the firing range below petered out as the men looked up, a moment of confusion passing over them. The walkway hanging from the ceiling was just above him. Evan stepped onto the window frame and jumped, grabbing hold of the beams under the walkway and pulled himself up onto it.

A call came from below. The armoured man ordered them all to fire, and they readied the weapons they held. Liana dove out of the control room and shot across the length of the firing range, landing by the door on the far end. The rifles opened fire, bursting over the walkway and cracking the metal railing. Evan ducked and stumbled, and broke into a run towards the door. He channelled a turbulent wind that swirled around him, hoping to lose himself within the hazy air as he ran. It was a trick he'd used on a battlefield several times before. A few shots struck through the wind with heavy thuds as he ran.

By the time he reached Liana, she had activated her small device that unlocked the keypad by the door. The men below adjusted their positions to continue shooting at them. Several others were running out of the room, collecting weapons from the tables. Liana snatched the device away as the doors slid open with a mechanical hiss. A long corridor stretched out to their left, with a large round window on the far end.

"Out the window," Liana said, turning and breaking into a run.

Doors opened on one side and several guards entered the corridor, some carrying staffs and batons, some with rifles. Evan quickly counted men. Not all of them wore the silver and black uniforms; some wore more casual clothing, or heavier armour.

Rifles fired at them. Another disc of white light expanded from Liana's forearm, deflecting the shots in flashing thuds. She pushed off the wall and dove into them. Evan threw an arm out and released a burst of wind that threw two guards off their feet. Bullets struck the floor near Evan, sending him stumbling back. He held his broadsword before him, deflecting some shots, before Liana focused on those riflemen.

Evan rose and pressed a hand against the wall beside him. He channelled his Earth sorcery and felt the wall tremble, his power coursing through it. The wall shook and several sections broke off, shooting large missiles of cement at the guards.

Three staff wielders charged at Evan.

He ducked under a swinging staff and struck the guard's chest. The man fell back, his armour splitting apart. Evan manoeuvred between winging staffs, cutting a rifle that pointed at him, blocking attacks and striking out when he could. A staff cracked against his back, throwing him to the ground.

He lay dazed for a moment before forcing himself to jump back into action, rolling free from another swinging staff. He threw himself to his feet and kept his attackers away with waves of his sword. He had trained against multiple enemies before, but it was only now, fighting real enemies, that Evan realised his training opponents had gone easy on him. Not wanting to hurt the Prince, most likely.

Liana flew overhead and landed on an attacker, smacking her sword hilt in his face. She threw her arm out towards a nearby guard, and a burst of frost appeared in the air. A boulder of ice struck the man's arm, pinning it against the wall and causing him to drop his handgun. The man remained stuck there with his arm covered in the ice fused with the wall.

"Make your way," she called out to Evan.

He turned back to the window on the far end, seeing only three soldiers remained in his path. Liana fought against another three.

A rifle lay at Evan's feet. He may have needed a Trigger Switch for it, or it may have been one of the weapons that didn't need one. But Evan would not fire the rifle even if he could. His people didn't use, or trust, firearms. It was weapons like these that had killed hundreds of his people. Weapons made in places like this. He could be looking at the very weapons that had driven his people out of their homeland. Evan charged at the guards in his way; he would show them how useful a rifle was.

He deflected a bombardment of shots with his sword as he moved. One bullet grazed his arm and he grimaced sharply but kept moving. Liana's fight with the other guards crossed his path, causing the riflemen to stop firing at him. Evan strode through the fight, passing guards thrown against the wall, while channelling sorcery into his hand. As the riflemen drew closer and took aim, Evan cried out and threw his arm forward.

A torrent of wind burst out, almost pushing him off his feet, as the rifles opened fire. Clouds of black energy dispersed with the wind. The powerful blast hit the three guards and sent them flying back several feet. The dark force, shimmering with a purple energy, continued to barrel through the corridor like a flood and smashed through the window on the end. Bullets scattered onto the floor. They had been caught by the wind and thrown back; a feat Evan hadn't even known was possible.

*No match for sorcery*, he thought. It would have been a proud thought were it not for the dark energy that had also escaped him. It left a sour taste in his mouth.

Hot sunlight streamed in through the shattered window, warming the corridor.

Liana finished with the remaining guards and ran towards Evan. The men on the ground stirred and groaned. Liana struck one as she jogged past and kicked a rifle out of the reach of another.

"Good work," she said. "Now let's get out of here."

A large figure dropped in through the window. Liana and Evan stopped a few feet away. The figure was a dark shape against the bright sunlight, but Evan saw it was a man in close-fitting armours. The tall man stepped closer in controlled strides, revealing short-cropped hair and a light beard, with a serious look of determination. In his hand was a large sword, almost as wide as Evan's and possibly even longer. A crystal-shaped blade protruded from the end of the long hilt.

"Stay back," Liana said to Evan. He detected the edge of fear and surprise in her voice, which caused his own pulse to rise.

Evan recognised the man for what he was, something inside him explaining everything. They faced an Oneron. One working for Jaxx. He knew this would not be an easy opponent.

Liana dove forward and swung her sword out. Compared to the man's overly large sword, hers was straight and narrow. The Oneron man burst into action, blocking her attack and striking out. She managed to block as she landed but was thrown back. The man spun and twirled around her attacks. Liana jumped back, pressed off the wall and flipped over him. They met again in a clash of blurred swings and clanging metals, before jumping back and then darting towards each other again. Both fighters were an impressive blur of acrobatic prowess.

They moved so quickly Evan could hardly keep up, and for a second he paused, finally seeing two Oneron warriors for the impressive fighters they were. But Evan was not there to watch. He rushed forward, timing his strike, and lashed out between Liana's attacks.

They swung out and ducked around the man, but his large sword was enough to keep them both back, blocking and spinning between the two. A surge of ice built up over Liana's hand as she readied an attack, but a quick spin-kick across her face sent her spiralling, the ice fading to mist. As Liana steadied herself, an open cut on her forehead, Evan's sword clashed against the Oneron's blade. The man jerked his arm around and the hilt-blade caught Evan across the cheek. Evan staggered back, vision blurring as a sharp pain jarred him.

The Oneron readied another blow but Liana was behind him again. He shifted and turned his attack into a block, and then twisted around in a spiralling flip to lash out with two kicks. Liana quickly recovered and followed with a series of attacks that were just about blocked as the man faltered back towards the window.

Sweat dripped from Evan's brow, mixing with the flowing blood that partially covered one eye. But their enemy was almost overwhelmed, and he had to keep going. He would not let his journey end here in this tower. Evan channelled his power into his hand, fighting back the fatigue aching his muscles, and pushed outwards. A pillar of heavy wind streamed outwards, sparking with lightning. Liana jumped to the side and the wind hit the man in the chest and threw him back out through the window. His splayed form disappeared from view, the heavy wind dissipating in the open air.

Liana leaned on her sword, breathing sharply. "Nice work," she said.

Evan nodded to her, wiping blood away from his eyes. They stepped towards the window, and saw there was no sign of the Oneron.

A hot wind blew over them. Liana sheathed her sword and pulled out her grapple hook. She shot a long cable at a walkway above them.

Movement came from behind them as several more armoured guards came in from the side door of the corridor.

"I hope you don't mind being carried," Liana said, pulling an arm around Evan before he could answer.

Evan managed a quick look over the empty air and the ground far below them as Liana pushed off. He held, hooking a leg around her waist as they fell through the air. The moment caused his stomach to lurch and his head spun wildly.

The cable tightened and they began swinging across the side of the tower, the hot air whipping their clothes. Evan squeezed his eyes shut, attempting to hide from the moment and trust Liana to get them to safety.

They began descending and Evan realised that the cable was lengthening, allowing them to drop with some control. The cable suddenly caught on a walkway higher up and they reeled, swinging forward and up. They fell through the air – a zinging sound and a sharp click told Evan the grapple hook had retracted back to the handle – and landed on a metal railing one level off the ground.

Liana let go and Evan steadied himself against the railing, his head still spinning. The heat was stifling and overbearing.

"We need to keep moving," Liana said, laying a hand on his back. "We can breathe when we're farther away." Her voice was stern but not harsh.

Evan followed her to a set of metal steps that led to the earthy ground. A rocky area rose up by this side of the tower, leading to a few short buildings and dirt paths.

They just needed to reach their craft and leave town. Despite the exhaustion threatening to drop him, Evan felt a thrill spur him on. He had enjoyed striking a blow within the tower of the enemy. Now he had a target to channel his hatred and frustration.