

Chapter Forty Two: Hard Choices - Part One

Evan blocked a swinging staff and then spun and swung behind him to strike out against another guard. He ducked under a swinging sword from a third guard as he threw himself back to clear ground and allow himself time to gather his next attack. The three guards were on him, and between his blocks and quick side steps, he threw out a heavy downward chop and crashed his sword down onto the chest armour of a guard, cracking the armour and sending the man to the ground.

Gunfire tore across the battlefield, which had now filled with a thin layer of smoke from all the blasts of plasma and bullets striking the ground. Bodies flew this way and that, and Evan couldn't be sure if they were leaps from the Oneron or corpses thrown back by explosions.

Evan threw himself close to a guard who raised a staff to bring down on him, and slammed the flat of his broadsword into his chest, as though he were swinging a bat. Evan summoned a burst of Wind Sorcery in the moment of impact, and the hit sent the man spiralling into the air.

The sound of rushing air came to Evan a moment before a thick metal staff swung into view. He leapt to the side as the staff tip cracked into the dusty earth. It retracted back, dragging across the ground, and Evan saw it snap into place and become a six-foot staff again, in the hands of Jaxx's bodyguard. During the battle, having become overwhelmed with other guards, Evan had momentarily lost sight of the wolf-man. With the nearby Oneron taking on the nearest guards, now Evan had an opportunity to finish off this dangerous foe.

He rushed forward with his sword raised. A blast of dizziness took his legs from him and he faltered. The entire planet felt like it had rocked. He steadied himself and continued his approach.

"I will no longer be a slave to Higero Jaxx's illusions," Evan shouted as he swung a series of attacks. "If he were not a coward, he would face me himself."

Vogri blocked the attacks and pushed himself back to clear space.

"You have been marked, Voarn," Vogri said, his voice a snarling hiss. "The sphere of influence is upon you. As long as you are near the forge, you will feel his effects. You cannot win here."

A whining whistle rang through the air as one of Jaxx's guards shot a missile downwards. The impact caused a concussive detonation that threw out a ring of fire; a large wall of flames that expanded outwards. Several Oneron and guards were caught up in the flames, bodies flailing in the air. Evan raised an arm up instinctively against the hot wind that blew over him.

Evan steadied himself. Runn was stirring. It wanted out. But there was no way Evan would risk releasing him. The demon may have helped him in a dire moment previously, but Evan ran the risk of giving him too much power, and pushing him out beyond a point that couldn't be controlled.

Vogri appeared at his side and the staff cracked against Evan's head with a powerful jolt. He hit the ground hard, tensing against the pain shooting through him. He should have been focusing on his enemy, but it felt like he was up against two foes. One external and one internal.

Another shove from Runn. *No*, Evan cried internally. *You will remain in place. Do not anger me.*

He rose to his feet. Vogri was gone. Nowhere to be seen on the battlefield. An urgent shove came from Evan's chest and left through his head. He looked up in time to see Vogri falling towards him. Evan dove away as the staff slammed down, cracking the earth.

It had been a warning from Runn, he realised. The demon had wanted to help him.

Sword and staff clashed again in a series of attacks. The golden sceptre on Evan's back suddenly felt heavy and prominent. Perhaps another influence from Runn. Perhaps one of Jaxx's tricks. Vogri finished with a backflip and his staff extended to strike Evan across the jaw, throwing him back to the ground.

Evan held his throbbing face, and saw his hand came back with blood. Another pulse from Runn sent a shiver of annoyance through him. *Stay your place, demon!*

Nearby, something exploded and the ground trembled. A shadow passed over him as an Oneron flew across the sky.

Anger flared within Evan, frustrated at the demon and at the formidable enemy he faced. He sprang up, swinging out fiercely, and his sword shuddered with a dark energy as Vogri blocked with the staff. The impact knocked Vogri off his feet and he hit the ground, rolling in a cloud of dust.

Evan regarded his sword. The dark blade still repelled the light, but there was something else that lingered within it. A force that was both external and internal. Runn had momentarily escaped, he realised, having channelled himself into the sword. And it was the first good blow that Evan had made.

Vogri rose shakily to his feet, scowling at Evan.

"I have my tricks, too," Vogri said menacingly. He pointed the end of his staff at Evan, and a blue light built at the tip, charging with energy. Evan dove to the side as a sphere shot towards him and struck the earth with an explosive burst.

Evan came up and rushed towards Vogri. His enemy blurred into two people. Vogri merged with Evan's father, overlapping each other as if he was seeing them both at the same time. Evan countered his strikes and lashed out with his own attacks. He felt the prods from Runn, and this time loosened the restraints, just a little. Minutely turning a cog to release pressure. A black glow streamed in the wake of his sword swings now, and Vogri stumbled back as he blocked and dodged.

Evan understood the reason for the two people. Jaxx's influence was attempting to represent Vogri as his father, but he was able to see past that now, thanks to Melida's potion

Evan stomped forward with determination. The image of his father would affect him no longer. Now was not the time to dwell on the past; to allow past ghosts to hold back the present. The energy from Runn shivered through him, almost like the soothing effects of Restoration sorcery. But rather than healing, it was... empowering.

An armoured guard came at his side with an electrified baton. Evan lashed out with a heavy swing that cracked the man's chest armour and threw him to the ground, and kept walking without pausing.

His father's sword, darkened by the demon within him, glowed with a writhing, inky power. Vogri, now only eight feet away, aimed his staff again and another blue orb gathered at the tip. As it shot out, Evan flung an arm to the side and a sharp wind sent the orb spinning away.

Streams of dark blue light mixed with the heavy wind that billowed around Evan, ruffling his hair. A sharp ache coursed through him, and he could feel his old injuries threatening to come back in full effect. But he willed himself to stay strong and focus on the sorcery. Sparks of lightning crackled within the swirling air, and this time it did not worry him. He marched the backstepping Vogri, readying his glowing sword.

Two more guards came at him from the side. Their rifles shot solid streams of electric energy at him. The energy caught the wind and spiralled away, arcing like lightning and striking the ground. Evan pointed a hand towards them and a gust of wind threw them up into the air, and they crashed back onto a nearby craft, denting the roof.

Vogri planted his feet against the swirling wind and struck out, his staff connecting with Evan's intercepting sword. As Vogri jumped back to avoid Evan's next strike, he wavered in the air a moment, almost carried by the wind before he managed to land.

There was no longer an image of Evan's father. There was only the enemy. One that was keeping Evan from finding James.

Evan pulled back, readying his sword, and cried out as he swung upwards, feeling the force of his Wind Sorcery reinforced by Runn's power. The force of the blow struck Vogri in the chest and sent him hurtling into the air, pushed even more by the sorcerous wind. He sailed

for a long moment, before crashing back down far in the distance. Vo remained on the ground, blood pouring from his mouth and nose.

Evan dug his sword in the ground and rested on the cross-guard, huffing and panting. He had finally done it. He searched the battlefield for his bearings, looking for the entrance to the forge.

An Oneron was jumping off a walkway high up the forge tower. He fired back a beam of Light sorcery that cut through the railing holdings and sent several guards falling, before firing his grapple hook and shooting up to a higher level. Many bodies lay around the scorched earth. Some were Oneron soldiers, Evan noted with sorrow.

The main double doors of the forge were open. Evan just had to get inside and he would have but one focus.

A shimmering light caught his eye.

He turned back to see a golden green orb of light surrounding Vogri's body. The glow lifted him off the ground, raising his staff alongside him. It was then that Evan saw the light was from emerging from the staff itself. Vogri revolved to a standing position, and his eyes opened when his feet touched the ground. The light re-entered the staff and disappeared.

By all the gods! Evan realised what he had just witnessed, and frowned deeply. The staff Vogri carried had many tricks; including a powerful healing sorcery that had just restored him.

Evan sighed harshly. He pulled the golden sceptre off his back, and headed for Vogri.

James stepped over the body of a downed guard. Bruises and blood stains covered his bare torso, and blood had pooled down his leg to leave prints as he walked down the metal corridor. He felt like a broken and battered version of his former self, with only his toughlets to remind him of who he was. He should have been dead already. Or at least passed out from blood loss. And yet somehow, he felt as strong as ever. And he was mad.

A man in clinking heavy armour rounded the corner of the corridor ahead, wielding a broadsword. James grit his teeth. He dove onto the wall, ran a couple of steps along it, and jumped over the man as the guard swung at him. James caught the man's arm and twisted it as he dropped behind him, breaking the arm with a crunch. The sword dropped with a loud clang. He shoved the man to the ground and continued down the corridor.

He walked with shoulders tense and fists clenched, an anger growing in him, spurring him on. The baton's he'd wielded had been lost along the way – one imbedded in the thigh of a guard – but he felt powerful even unarmed. James was sick of being attacked, and feeling so helpless to defend himself. He had tried for days to understand himself better, to learn

about himself, to use magic and fight with a sword. To be brave. And all he had managed to do was get himself captured and tortured. Every time he thought he was getting better, doing something to prove he was stronger than people thought, he would end up showing just how useless he was.

He had come across five guards since leaving his cell, and had barely paused as he went through them. Despite the shock waves of pain coursing through him, there was no action he couldn't do. He felt like a ghost who had yet to realise it was dead. He told himself that if this was it, if he only had a short time left before his adrenaline wore off and he dropped dead, then he'd at least go out fighting. He'd seen how Liana had moved, how Sam had fought, and now it all seemed so simple to him. James wasn't remembering how he used to be - how to fight like an Oneron - he was just moving on instinct and finding that his body responded better than ever.

A side door opened in front of him and a red-skinned man in a buttoned shirt appeared, startled by James's closeness. His hand went to a pistol on his belt. James grabbed him by the shirt and slammed him against the opposite wall, throwing punches into his torso. The man crumpled to the ground. James realised the man had likely just been a worker in the forge, but still, an enemy was an enemy. He checked the doorway and saw it led to a stairwell. He took the stairs up three levels to a door at the top.

James flexed his hands as he strode down another corridor, this one larger with circular windows on either side, letting in daylight. A rumbling explosion came from beyond the walls. James jogged to a nearby window and looked out. He perked up when he saw the Oneron soldiers diving through the air and swinging on their grapple hooks. They had come for him. Smoke drifted from scorched marks on the earth, and dozens of bodies lay around the area.

James searched frantically for faces he recognised, but could see none. He hoped his friends were out there somewhere, and that they were still alive. Jaxx seemed to have an endless stream of guards with powerful weapons, and the Oneron would not last long, no matter how skilled they were.

From his viewpoint he guessed he was on one of the walkways that connected the shorter buildings to the main tower. The round windows were too small for him to fit through, so he kept going.

His friends were out there, risking their lives. Or maybe they had already been killed. Maybe Sam and Evan weren't recovered enough to come back to the forge. If they had been imprisoned down below with him, he would have come across them already.

James clenched his fists. He hated all the pain and suffering everyone had gone through. He hated being a disappointment to Evan. He hated having to rely so much on other people to tell him who he was meant to be. People who had lied to him more than they told the truth.

Two men rounded the corner at the end of the corridor. The first one raised a heavy rifle and shot a hot bolt of red energy. It soared by James's head and struck the wall behind him. James cried out and threw his arm forward, fingers spread wide. A solid beam of Light cut through the air and struck the man, slamming him against the wall and singing his light armoured covering. James was taken back at the magic he had just thrown.

The second man had a sword across his back, but he held a long rifle that emanated yellow light through hissing vents. James rushed towards him as he aimed and fired a ball of golden plasma. The blast streamed by James as he jumped against the wall. He pushed off and cleared the distance to plant his feet against the opposite wall, then jumped up to the ceiling and threw himself down towards the man. The rifle fired as James landed a kick to the head, and the energy ball struck the ceiling with an explosive shockwave. Molten plasma oozed thickly over the exposed hole in the ceiling. The man remained on the ground, unconscious.

Jaxx must have been desperate to allow his men to use such destructive weapons inside the forge. It told James that Jaxx no longer cared for the forge, and was likely planning on not returning when he left. He considered using one of them, as they were likely free-arm rifles, produced in the forge. Then he decided he had dealt with enough destruction, and just wanted to find his friends and get away.

Double doors were at the end of the corridor. James turned back to the hole in the ceiling, and stepped towards that. He had a way out, at least.

A mechanical whirring came from beyond the double doors. An elevator moving. Electronics shifted behind the doors as the whirring stopped. The doors slid open to reveal a man in dark clothing with a serious expression.

James paused at the sight. The tall man had a tanned complexion and a short beard. He carried a very wide sword that came to a hooked point, with a long diamond-shaped blade on the end of the long hilt. At first James thought it was the Maldrinn Liana had given him, but then saw it was a larger model with a different cross-guard.

The bearded man stepped forward, keeping the sword at his side. James's pulse had quickened, realising he was faced with an enemy Oneron. He set his jaw and told himself it did not matter. His eyes flicked to the downed man with the sword across his back, by the elevator doors.

"James Island," the man said in a deep, calm voice.

James was still surprised how many people seemed to know who he was, given that he was meant to have been hidden on this world.

"Orders are not to let you leave here alive," the man said.

"And that's what you do?" James asked, stepping back. "Follow orders?"

The man made a half-shrug gesture. "A soldier learns to do so. But this time... this will be for myself."

James's brows tensed. Just behind the Oneron was the guard's sword and rifle. James knew he had to stand and fight, but couldn't help hesitating in the moment. His body tensed at seeing the man's belt. Hanging beside the man's brown and gold grapple hook, was James's own grapple hook. His father's old possession.

The man must have seen the severe look on James. "My newest toy," he said, proudly. "I never thought I'd own the grapple hook of the famous Hayden Island. Too bad his son never took after him. Always a shame when kids don't live up to expectations."

James glared at him, his pulse rising. The man smirked. He had an arrogant air about him.

The enemy Oneron raised his sword and swung it around him for momentum, and then struck out. James ducked and had to quickly dodge as the large sword swung back for him. James dove forward, leaving bloody smears as he skidded across the ground passed the Oneron, and came to the downed guard. He released the sword from the guard's back. It looked like a simple blade but felt sturdy.

James readied the sword and went for the Oneron, swinging high then low. His attacks were slow and weak, his injuries holding him back. The man blocked each strike with little effort. An elbow shot out and cracked against James's side, sending him to the ground with spasms of pain. He fought to control his breath and rose back to his feet, using the wall to steady himself. The Oneron paced casually, as if giving him time to recover.

Adrenaline spurred James on and he rushed forward with the sword swinging. The Maldrinn clashed against his sword and twisted in a jerking motion. The blade on the hilt flashed up and caught James across the forehead. He stumbled back with surprise and stinging pain. The man was fast. And he barely looked to be stressed or concerned.

Again, the Oneron appeared to hold back, allowing James time to collect himself. The singed hole in the ceiling was just behind James now, still dripping with the remains of the golden plasma. He wouldn't last much longer facing the Oneron like this. He turned and went for the hole.

As he jumped, a boot caught him in the back and knocked him back down. His sword clanged to the ground nearby. One of James's toughlets skimmed across a pool of the molten plasma and began burning. He pushed himself back along the ground as the Oneron came to him. His toughlet was melting and smoking; he could feel the heat of it on his skin. James lay there, held down by the sharp stabs of pain from multiple injuries.

The Oneron brought his sword up as he stepped closer. James grit his teeth and lunged up. As the sword swung for him, he struck the man in the face with his burning toughlet. The momentum threw James back to the ground as his legs gave way. The man cried out as hot plasma burned the side of his face. He pressed a hand to his face and keeled over with pain.

When he righted himself, James saw the remains of a green glow leave his hand. A nasty patch of burned skin, blistered and scarred, remained on his neck and face, but the bleeding had stopped, and his hand showed no signs of damage. Half his beard had been removed.

The man scowled at James, breathing heavily. He stepped closer as James backed away on the ground, but made no sign of attack.

"It's been over forty years since I first killed someone," the Oneron said. "And in that time, I've killed a lot of people. Hundreds, maybe. Many soldiers. Many men and women. One kid. And you know what? I never felt remorse for any of it. Not one bit." He stopped in front of James and looked down at him. "Does that make me a bad person?"

"No good person can kill innocent people," James said defiantly. "You're deluded if you think otherwise."

The man appeared to consider this. A wisp of smoke lingered around the burned side of his face. "I see it as weeding out the weak from the galaxy. I can make the galaxy a stronger place, by removing weak soldiers like you. I give them a chance to prove themselves first, when I can."

That's why he had been toying with James.

"And that kid?" James asked. "Was he too weak to continue living?"

Something dark passed behind the man's eyes, a shadow falling on his face. "You can ask him yourself."

The large sword rose and swung down hard. With no time to move, James crossed his forearms over him and summoned his Light Shield. The blade cracked into the toughlets and pain reverberated up James's arms. The metal bands shattered and fell to the ground in pieces, scattering dozens of clanging screws and bolts from their broken compartments. Blood streamed down James's bare arms. His head fell back and hit the floor. He was too exhausted to think about anything but the pain.

He became aware of movement from the side, slow and non-threatening. The Oneron sat down beside James with his back against the wall and knees close to his chest. The two grapple hooks on his belt clinked against the ground with dull tones.

"Remove the weak, and only the strong remain," the man said, almost conversationally. "Whatever I do, it's right by the way I see it. And I bet, if you were in a better state of mind, you'd see that too. Whatever I do, is what I was meant to do."

Whatever has happened, is the right way. James was vaguely aware of his conversation with Sam back in Tyken Town, about the choices people make. James had decided that whatever he did, whatever happened, was meant to happen. And there was no other way.

James coughed and spat out blood to the side. His arms felt cold without his toughlets, and he suddenly felt exposed without them, despite being already topless. He looked over the remains of the toughlets with blurred eyes. Screws, nails, bolts, and tools had been scattered. The broken remains of the life he had in Tyken Town. The life he once knew.

He rested his head against the ground and closed his eyes, feeling his body shutting down. It was almost like falling asleep.

"I have to tell you," the man said.

"I know," James said weakly, eyes still closed. "You're not impressed."

The man's chuckle was hollow, without humour.

"I get that a lot," James said.

A single thought swam through the blackness of James's mind. He was going to die. It was followed by another thought. He wanted to kill this man first. He wanted to prove to himself that he could accomplish something - to remove the galaxy of this monster - before he died.

Something cold worked its way through his body, like an electrostatic impulse. James hoped it was whatever had kept him going for so long. He vaguely heard the Oneron say something, and could sense him rising up beside him. A final blow would be imminent.

Now was the time to get up. Now was the time to fight or die.