

Chapter Forty Four: A New Day - Part One

A solemn air filled the study, carrying the weight of the events that had unfolded. Sam sat in a soft armchair, trying not to move too much. He was bruised, battered and mentally exhausted, having spent the night recovering in the infirmary with James and Evan. He had lost track of the time of day but guessed it was late morning, judging by the light streaming in from the open double doors that led to a balcony.

Liana stood across the room, looking over a screen in her hand with a concentrated frown. Jorak and Den had been discussing the newscasts coming from what was now the remains of the iron forge, while Evan and Melida were sat quietly on a sofa opposite Sam. Evan looked as rough as Sam felt - a bandage showing under his shirt and bruises on his face - though he seemed to be recovering well, and had been the first to get out of bed. One of his pointed ears had been cut open and was now covered with a padded wrapping. Sam's thoughts went to James, who had yet to awake. James was alive and his vital signs looked relatively normal, but he had been in a light coma since they found him in the ruins of the forge. Sam swallowed a lump in his throat, still shocked at the bloodied, wounded mess James had been in.

"We have Jaxx in a hold," Liana said, looking up from her screen, responding to a question from Den about security. "Under armed guard. He won't be going anywhere."

"How long until the Avancheon get here?" Jorak asked. Having filled a cup with water, he sat down on the second sofa beside Den, who had his braced leg outstretched.

"Their official word is several hours away still," Liana said. "The representative and a small squadron should get here during the night. I've updated them regarding the iron forge."

"So much for the cavalry," Jorak grumbled.

Liana frowned. Sam knew what she was thinking. If they had convinced the Oneron military that Jaxx posed a greater threat, they could have received help when they needed it. And they wouldn't have lost nine soldiers. She swallowed and said, "They'll be taking Jaxx away, to deal with him, and that will be the end of the matter for us."

"Do we know what caused the tower to fall?" Evan asked.

Liana shook her head. "We can guess Jaxx had a back-up bomb somewhere. Something we missed. We're still looking into it."

Evan looked unconvinced, his head tilting in thought. "I have given my report that I felt a sorcerous presence. It was no mere explosion."

"Can you expand on that?" Den asked him, his voice soothing and understanding.

"I am not fully sure how to say it," Evan said. "Except that I felt a power on par with the presence of a god. The way it disorientated me, almost causing me to vomit. It is a quite distinct sensation."

Since Evan had mentioned what he'd felt, back in the infirmary, Sam had wondered if he had really felt such a thing. No one else seemed to have sensed such a power. But then Evan had been closest to the forge at the time. And he had always been more in-tuned with magical forces.

Sam grimaced as a slight spasm of pain forked through his side. A few times now, he had tried sprinkling some Restoration magic over himself, but in his exhausted state it had only served to drain him more than it could heal. He could have done with some sagka, but they had drunk some earlier and had to wait some time before they could have more to avoid overdosing.

"It was not a traditional explosion," Liana said. "We could assume it was a strange bomb devised by Jaxx to bring down the forge, perhaps for him to spin a story to the newscasts after it had blown."

"That sounds like a stretch," Jorak said.

"I know," Liana said, also looking unconvinced as she cast her gaze back to her screen and avoided their eyes.

Sam guessed she was holding something back, seeing the familiar guarded look on her face. Had she also sensed what Evan had?

"We have soldiers keeping the guards in a building near the forge remains," Liana said. "They all seem to be mostly complying with our men. Maybe they understand they're defeated, now that Jaxx has been taken in. We still have to confirm if they're under any mind-altering substances. But that's more we'll leave for the Avancheon to determine."

She tapped into her screen and the large monitor against the wall near her came to life, showing a local newscast channel. Cameras were near the debris of the forge, filming the crumpled remains. Most of the towers had been burned to ash, while some walls and framework could be seen within the giant mound of mess. Sam felt a great unease come over him. A standard explosive device couldn't have done that to the tower; not without also destroying the ground and surrounding area in a blast radius.

"The Newscasts and Lawmen are all over the area," Liana said. "There've been some wild speculations as to what had happened at the forge. I've told our men to remain undetected and not give any statements."

Sam shook his head, feeling a dull ache in his head from the motion. "Jaxx isn't around to spin his stories and get the town on his side."

Evan sat up straighter. "His Illusion sorcery. Are your men safe with him in his hold? He may try some of his tricks."

"No one is going near him," Liana said. "We have him under surveillance, and chained to his chair with a restraint over his mouth. And, we have him under a mild sedative to keep him calm and unfocused. He's no threat."

She turned the large monitor off with her screen and then stepped to the sofa by Evan and Melida, sitting on the armrest. Her face was troubled as she looked over them all.

Despite the tension in the air as they continued to discuss their next steps, Sam had to admit he felt a great weight had left him. It may have been because Jaxx was now their captive, but more so that he had chosen to wield his old sword and grapple hook, and become an Oneron Soldier once more. It felt right, now, leading the life he once led. And he knew it didn't mean he'd have to return to the man he once was. He could take the new man he'd become and move on with a fresh start. He couldn't forget about the lives that were lost under his command – he would always have those five hundred and nine souls as a part of him – but he felt confident now, more than ever before, that he could find some way to live with it.

"We have some information to tell you all." The tension in Jorak's voice snapped Sam to attention. The man was watching his daughter with some apprehension.

Liana looked up from her screen with a pained and hesitant expression. "I was going to wait for James to wake up before I shared this with you all. But we've been looking over the files we retrieved from the forge before it blew, bypassing what encrypted data we could, and discovered some information."

She stood and stepped closer to the centre of the room. "We have what looks like a confirmation of how many guards Jaxx has on record." She met Sam's eyes. "There are multiple mentions of him having a hundred thousand guards, and the means to arm them all."

"But of course, data isn't fact," Jorak said. He sounded unconcerned though he held a grave look, his mouth a tight line under his beard.

Sam got the impression that Jorak and Liana had discussed this data at length already, and she was more concerned about it than he was.

"If true," Den said. "the question is where he is keeping a force that large."

"And he's able to arm them all," Sam said, frowning. "Which means he may have other forges out there, creating more free-arm weapons."

"Whatever the case," Jorak said, "it's for the Avancheon to handle now. We hand over all the data we have and let them deal with the rest. This is above us all."

Liana shook her head, tapping a finger on the border of her screen. "It's not that simple. We have proof in here that Jaxx has been working with Codo Industries. Doon's organisation. And if Doon is involved somewhere in all this, then that means this is far bigger than any of us could have imagined."

"You give that warlord too much credit," Jorak said.

"And you don't give him enough," Liana shot back.

"So, what does this mean?" Sam said, trying to keep control of the conversation. "The army is Doon's? Jaxx was simply the weapons manufacturer? That sounds more plausible than Jaxx gathering such a large force on his own."

Liana shook her head again. "There's a lot we still need to find out."

"Perhaps I will go with the Avancheon," Den said. "I may be of some help to them in their further investigation."

"What happened to a quieter life?" Sam said to him. He hadn't expected Den to return to the military life so suddenly, and seemingly with little conflict.

"Surrounding myself with military folk won't be so bad," Den told him. "There is something soothing about the hum of a ship, too. I'm sure it'll be frightfully boring work, but if I can be of any service, I will gladly volunteer."

Sam nodded to the old man, something unspoken passing between them. He had the feeling that Den's piercing gaze was telling him that things were going to be okay. That Sam had nothing to worry about. Both Den and Sam moving on from their past selves and leading new lives only meant good things. Sam thought he understood as he held Den's look and nodded back.

"The question does remain," Evan said, looking over them all, "why would this Doon amass such a large army?"

"Simple," Jorak said. "Control. Doon wants to make a play for control. Be the biggest force in the galaxy. I've seen men like him come and go, and they all go."

"Overthrowing the Uri-Thuren council is no easy task," Den said. "The governing bodies of the galaxy are not simple entities that can be overpowered with force."

"Sure," Jorak said, "but with *enough* force..."

After a short silence fell on the room, Sam said, "Whatever Doon is planning, Jaxx must know what it is. And we'll get it out of him. If not us here, then the Avancheon will."

"Right," Liana said. "There's something bigger here, but it's for the Avancheon to handle now. We've played our part." She sounded certain, although Sam could tell from the uneasy look in her eyes that she didn't fully believe her own words.

"Indeed," Den said, casting a look over at Sam. "Our parts have been played."

Sam swallowed a lump in his throat. "Which means no more lying to James. I'm done with that. Once..." he paused, thinking of James's condition. "Once he's recovered, I intend on telling him everything he wants to know."