

Chapter Thirty Two: Back In Training - Part One

James had only been in the underground training chamber a few hours earlier, but it felt like a lot had happened since then. Despite his earlier weariness of the day's events, he felt a renewed vigor at the prospect of training again. To push himself in a safe environment where he couldn't get himself killed by jumping off a building or have bullets flying by his head.

Liana studied the rectangular device in her hands as she stepped into the hanger. It looked to James like a bulky pair of binoculars, but instead of lenses, the glass on the end was a scanner. She had picked up the Switch Detector from a storage room on their way down.

"It's dead," she said to him. "Not surprising, as it hasn't been used in some time. I almost forgot we had one. Don't worry though; I'll set it charging now."

"Thanks," James said, still apprehensive about what results the device would give him.

Liana entered the control booth and flicked a few switches, and then attached the Switch Detector to a cable. "We'll need a few minutes at least until it has enough juice to work. So we can get you back on the Grid in the meantime."

James stretched his arms and neck, readying himself for the training. He cast a look at the tall towers and interlocking beams over the rest of the area. He could see now, the idea of swinging with a grapple hook between the beams, and jumping to each tower. The thought gave him a chill that was both uneasy and thrilling.

"We'll get you on the towers next," Liana said, watching him. "For now I want you to work on your movement. Get your basic agility locked down. "

"Bring it on," he said, trying to sound confident.

She smiled. "You have a lot of drive, James. That's good. Even given everything you've gone through today."

"You know," James said, "I feel more alive than ever." He paused, wanting to tell her it was because he was in her company. Then realised what a ridiculous and inappropriate thing that would be to say. "I thought I was tired but, I'm actually eager for more. I don't quite know how to put it, but... I feel like doing something."

"Great." She finished pressing a few buttons from within the booth. Faint blue lights came alive and highlighted the grid floor by James. "Now last time," she said as she came over to him, "we tried a five second timer, which was no problem for you."

"And the four second timer was fine," James said. "Apart from a little stumble."

"Right, you did well with the four second timer too. Now I've set it to three-point-five seconds. And, this time I want you with your sword."

"Ok then," James said. "You might as well make it an even three seconds."

Liana lowered an eyebrow and smirked. "The difference in half a second can be greater than you think."

"I may fail miserably," James said, shrugging, "but I'd like to give it a go and see how I do. Now I know what to expect with the Grid."

"Very well. If you fall in any sort of funny way, I can't promise I won't laugh." She re-entered the booth and tapped a few more buttons.

James studied the floor grid and thought of what could be achieved on there, and of all the great soldiers that had likely trained on it. The low hum of the live grid called to him. Challenged him.

Liana beamed when she returned to him. "Ready, soldier?"

James nodded. He gripped his sword in his hand. His knife and grapple hook remained on his belt, and he still insisted on wearing his toughlets. It was just him and the grid now.

James stepped to the edge of the grid. Once he stepped onto it, he would only have three seconds before he set off the pressure alarm.

He burst forward, almost at a run, and began swinging his sword. At first he stuck to the three-strike combination Sam had taught him, then found himself improvising and doing what felt natural. He turned and kicked out, then spun and threw out a combination of swings. It felt like he was hesitating at first, but he soon found his momentum. He moved fiercely, driven by a powerful force, and pushed himself harder.

A panel turned red and a buzzer rang out.

He paused, panting, and turned towards Liana. He thought he had been doing so well.

"Don't over think it," she said. "Just keep moving and you'll get used to it. It can take time."

He nodded. A long beep signalled the grid becoming live again, and he moved. He was conscious of moving his hips and his feet, remembering what Liana had told him earlier. Now he was back in the room, in the same environment, his earlier lessons with her came back to him. It was different now, with a sword in hand, but the principles of always moving remained the same.

He lashed out with a succession of attacks and flowed into a backswing that brought him into another combination, adding in weaves and ducks as he pressed on. He imagined armoured enemies charging at him, and his sword knocking them back. When he came to a

corner of the grid he jumped back, and surprised himself when his push turned into a back flip. He landed clumsily but managed to right himself without–

The floor panel lit and rang out angrily.

He remained standing there, his shoulders heaving, and took a moment before looking at Liana.

"Impressive, James," she said behind him. "It really is. You want to keep going?"

The automatic timer beeped and the floor became live again. James turned and moved around, finding his footing. He fell into a rhythm of sword swings, ducks, and kicks – nothing too fancy – and kept going.

The imaginary enemies he fought turned into tall creatures with spiked limbs. The beasts that had come at him from the darkness of the Grillock Caves. A flush of hot anger rippled through him, and he used it as fuel to swing harder and move faster. He promised himself he would never freeze with fear again in the middle of battle.

After what felt like several minutes, the floor panel turned red again.

James huffed. "That was less than three seconds," he grunted angrily, glaring at the panel as if he were scolding a child.

"It's okay, James. Let's take a break?"

"One more go," he said. The grid became live again and he burst forward. Several seconds later a panel lit up.

James blew out a harsh breath, wiping sweat from his face. His legs were beginning to weaken. "One more."

Liana remained silent. He no longer wanted to look at her. He went again.

Sword combinations went into spin kicks and dodges. He eventually realised he was capable of bigger moves, if he gave them a go. Some moves just flowed into another naturally. A backward roll along the ground flipped him up and sent him into a twisting kick. James's mind was a blur, but a renewed strength flowed through him.

A heavy grunt left him as he flipped back, spinning in the air, and followed it with another spin kick that sent him into a second back flip. James stumbled backwards and set the floor panel off, catching himself before he could fall.

The buzzer echoed around them as the room became silent, filled only with James's heavy panting. He realised he had been standing there for some time and eventually turned to Liana. She stood at the far end of the grid, still as a statue, a wide-eyed look on her face. Through James's sweaty and blurred vision, he thought she even looked frightened.

"How about a break now?" James said, catching his breath.

Liana continued to watch him with folded arms. The floor grid automatically became live again and the panel beneath James soon flashed red and rang out. He remained standing there as silence filled the room again.

"Liana?" he asked. He began walking towards her, worried now he had done something wrong. Maybe he had looked ridiculous, having forgotten all his training and just flailed around on the grid like an idiot.

Liana's face softened and she unfolded her arms. "That was impressive," she said, though her voice had dulled, losing the enthusiasm she had earlier.

James came close to her. "Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head, a little too vigorously, and then smiled. She gestured to a bench by the wall and they stepped towards it. The grid lights dimmed automatically as it powered down to a low level.

"I shouldn't be so surprised," Liana said as she sat down. James sat beside her, watching her closely. "You are an Oneron soldier, after all. I didn't really know the extent of what happened to you with your lost memories, but I see that you haven't fully lost your abilities."

"I didn't think I could do much," James told her, wiping his brow. "I mean, I *don't* have any of my previous training. Maybe I have some muscle memory of fighting and using a sword. Maybe it helped me use the grapple hook for the first time. But it just doesn't *feel* like I know any of it. I don't know. But sometimes, once I get into something, I realise that it isn't so bad. Most of the time, anyway."

"The body remembers, even if the mind forgets." Her hair fell over one shoulder, framing her face, as she turned to him. Shadows accentuated her features, and her dark eyes glinted in the lowly lit area.

"What's wrong?" James asked. She was obviously troubled, and a part of him was too tired, too fed up of holding back, that he just wanted to speak his mind for once. He wanted to always speak his mind with her. And he was tired of people holding back with him, so he didn't want to hold back with anyone any more.

Liana sighed deeply. "You know, it feels like things have been piling up lately." She flapped a hand over the hanger. "This place. All this. It's all up to me to keep things running. To keep everyone safe and happy and strong."

She paused with a troubled, distant look. "I don't know if Sam told you," she went on. "Last season, a close friend of mine died. If I had done things differently, if the timing were different, he would still be alive. I know it was his own fault, for being the hero. He chose to

put his life before others. A part of me hates him for it. And another part hates being proud of him." Her eyes glistened as she looked over the room. "Whatever happens to the people of this outpost, it falls onto me."

James felt awkward, not knowing what to say, but he cleared his throat and said, "I'm so sorry, Liana. I can't imagine the pain you must be going through."

She turned to him with sorrowful eyes.

"You have a good heart," James said, his voice heavy and low. "It must be tough, caring so much. But I can see that you're strong enough to handle it. And you have to remember, you can't be responsible for everyone, even if you feel that way. Things happen. Things out of our control."

She nodded but seemed unconvinced. "I know." Her eyes shone with moisture as she held his look. They remained locked onto each other. Her jaw was set firmly, but there was a vulnerability about her. Something had changed with Liana, he thought. Her barriers had come down, and he could see more of the person she really was. He no longer saw her as the tough Captain of the Outpost, but as a scared and unsure woman dealing with the weight of responsibility.

"Liana, you're one of the strongest people I've ever met."

Her soft smile was sad. With James's two years of memories, he realised that statement wasn't as strong as it could have been.

Liana turned away as she said, "My father's years are catching up to him, despite his protests otherwise. I can see his mind has started to fail. Small things. But enough to cause me concern. I know at some point I'll have to start looking after him, too." She gave him a small smile, though her eyes were pained. "I know, things won't be as bad as I think. It's just hard to see that sometimes."

James opened his mouth, but no words came out. He wanted to tell her he would help if he could, but knew there was nothing he could do. He could only imagine what it would feel like to worry about the failing health of a parent.

Liana stared at the inactive grid with a blank, lost expression. "And of course, we have Higero Jaxx to deal with. With his connections and influence, it won't be easy to hold him down. Tomorrow will be a long day." She turned her body more towards James, her knee coming close to his. "Tomorrow. I want you to know there's no shame in staying back. If you feel you're not ready for a confrontation like this, one that could get dangerous. Trust me. No one here will think any less of you."

James frowned. It took him a moment to finally say, "Yesterday, we were in the Grillock Caves. Things went bad, and we got surrounded. I saw..." he stopped to clear his throat. "Sam was in danger, and I could have called out. I could have helped him. But I froze. I froze

and Sam got hurt. And I don't think he's been the same since. But one thing I know, is that I won't let myself hold back any more. I want to be there in the middle of things. Even if I might chop my own head off."

"Sam is stronger than he looks," she told him. "We all have our moments of doubt, and we let fear overpower our thoughts and blur our judgement. It's nothing to be ashamed of. You can use your fears and doubts as weapons to help you."

James flexed his right hand, seeing the faint marks on his palm left by the failed attempt at conjuring magic. He really wasn't good at any of this. But he knew Liana was right. He looked up and saw her with a soft, sincere expression that gave him pause. They remained looking at each other.

"So we have two more lessons," Liana said. "I want to get you up on those towers. Show you how to use your grapple hook and see how your jumping is. But before that I want to show you our shield magic. I'm guessing you've never summoned Light magic before?"

James tensed his brows. "No, never. I tried Fire magic earlier, but... it didn't go well." He couldn't help the shudder that shook his shoulders.

"Magic isn't so bad, once you get the hang of it. It's like the difference between knowing you'll survive leaping off a waterfall and never having tried it before."

"I don't know," James said. "I don't think I have the energy to try such a thing." Which was a lie. He felt more awake now than ever.

"We'll keep it simple and brief." Liana stood and gestured for him to do the same. Facing each other, she held James's arm up and moved her hand over his shoulder and down his bicep. "It's an energy that comes from inside us. It's always there, within everything. There is magic in the air we breathe. In the molecules that make up the entire universe. We just have to tap into it." Her hand settled on his, interlocking her fingers with his. Her touch was so soft, so delicate; it was almost a sensual act, and caused James's pulse to race.