

Chapter Forty One: Heroes and Villains - Part One

Rock walls surrounded the damp room. Firelight came through the heavy iron bars of the cell, from a sconce on the corridor beyond, sending shadows wavering over the rock. The glistening walls reminded James of his time in the Grillock Caves. They were a stark contrast to the smooth rock inside Mount Volton, his old sanctuary just outside of Tyken Town. He missed being back there, to feel safe again, when things were simpler. For the longest time it had been the closest feeling of home James had known – before he had found a stronger sense of belonging in the Oneron outpost. Now he wasn't sure if he would ever go back there again.

He sighed and sat back against the wall, bringing his knees up against his clasped hands, and grimaced from his injuries. How long had he been there now? Two hours? Four? For all he knew it could be the next day. He vaguely recalled being dragged down into this cave room, under the iron forge, and before that he thought he had seen Oneron soldiers appear in the courtyard and fight back Jaxx's men. He had drifted in and out of consciousness for some time.

Two guards were stationed beyond his cell, but they only ignored him and stared ahead. All James really knew was that he was beaten, bloodied, bruised, and his entire body ached. There was nothing to do but await his fate, and he hated that.

He hated feeling so helpless. Being so helpless. He wasn't surprised that he would get himself taken by the enemy. A constant drip of water nearby echoed through the corridor. It seemed to grow louder with each drop, and now felt as though it could bore into James's skull. He buried his head in his knees and let out another frustrated sigh.

Sam and the others would be coming for him. He knew it. He had to believe that they made it away from the forge, and weren't also prisoners somewhere nearby.

The incessant dripping echoes sent a shiver over him.

His captors had taken everything from him. He hated himself for losing his grapple hook, and the photo of his father, and promised himself he would get them back. They must have deemed his toughlets harmless, and left them on him. James was at least thankful for the comfort of their weight on his forearms.

Movement came from nearby; shifting boots, and then the low tones of a keypad being pressed. James lifted his head to see three figures by the entrance. The cell doors swung open with a grating whine as the guards stepped back, and Higerio Jaxx entered.

James stared, remaining still, his clasped hands tightening. Jaxx's suit and polished shoes contrasted with the muddy surroundings, making him look very out of place. James could now easily see past Jaxx's well-composed exterior and see him for the monster he was.

"How is our guest?" Jaxx said quietly. He came to a stop several feet away, before a pool of muddy water.

"You mean prisoner?" James said, finding his voice hoarse.

Jaxx nodded. "I suppose that is correct. I hope you understand this is just a precaution. I can't have you freely exploring the forge, and I needed some leverage against your friends. It's nothing personal. But..." He carefully stepped over the pool and squatted in front of James, meeting his gaze. Jaxx's reptilian eyes had a golden sheen, and the firelight highlighted the scales of his dark skin. "You know, James, you are a fascinating man. I'm surprised it took me so long to notice."

James licked a dry cut on his lip and remained silent.

"You seemed ordinary enough on record," Jaxx said. "Simple upbringing on Caplia. Rileforth Pilot Academy. Allied Starfield Academy. Five years' service on board The Keystone ship, with high honours. Several campaigns with the Daeyan military. Then things went quiet, a few years back. It took some digging to find out about the Dagredda Valley Attack. The local hospitals there have you on record as deceased. Even the Daeyan and Avancheon's records have you as Killed in Action."

James watched Jaxx carefully, holding back his rising heart rate. How much did Jaxx know of his memory loss? Was Jaxx baiting him with the lost information he knew James greatly wanted? He couldn't help but wonder what else Jaxx could tell him.

"But that isn't the most interesting part of you." Jaxx leaned forward, his keen eyes searching James closely. Then his heavy brows shifted, disappointed. "I really can't see anything in you. You understand, it is one of my blessings to be able to tap into a person, and allow them to see what I want them to see. And in order to do that I have to enter their mind. And yet, I can't seem to do that with you. Why do you think that is?"

James tried to keep his voice strong. "Why don't you just use your mind controlling serum on me?"

Jaxx smiled, showing his sharp teeth, though he appeared heavyhearted. "A crude method, I know, but a surprisingly useful one. I would rather you keep whatever mind you have, as that is what interests me the most."

"What do you want?"

"Merely to understand. And yet, my time on this planet is running short. I would just as well take you with me, but I haven't decided what a liability you'll be yet. So, I was hoping you would help me understand what is so special about you."

James glared defiantly at him. "I did start walking at a young age. Does that help?"

Jaxx chuckled quietly. "Maybe that is true." He looked thoughtful for a moment. "I've collected a great many people. Soldiers from all around, as you've seen. I would not mind adding you to my collection, if need be."

James glanced beyond the cell doors to the guards outside. They wore little armour, mostly thick leathers, but seeing them gave him a thought. "Like the Sacre guards you got? And you even made them rifles that looked like their own."

Jaxx's eyes shifted minutely as he studied James. "The good thing about attaining established guards is that they come pre-equipped," he said. "Saves me on arming them myself."

"So what are all the armaments for? If not to arm your own men? Or are they for your personal collection?"

Jaxx continued to watch him, as if looking for something that couldn't be seen. In a way it reminded James of the way Evan would search a person's face for some unseen thing. Jaxx eventually gave out a low sigh. "Understand, James, that the company you keep have all been lying to you; manipulating you to keep you compliant. I would not do the same. If you would join me, willingly and openly, I would give you everything in my power. And I can see it, in your eyes, that you're curious. I can feel it in you. I would take care of you. As a sign of good faith, I will tell you this. Your father, Hayden Island, still lives. He is not with Sacre, nor any other organisation. And he wishes very much to see you. I can help reunite you both."

James's pulse pounded in his ears as he fought to keep his composure, not wanting to give his feelings away. The thought of meeting his father stoked a fire within him he could hardly contain.

Jaxx rose to a standing position. "You don't have long to decide. You can come with me, or die in this cell. Starvation is not something to wish upon anyone." He straightened his suit jacket, turned and left the room. The cell door clanged shut behind him.

"If he tries to escape," Jaxx told the guards, "you may kill him. In any way you please." He gave a final look to James through the bars before he left. His softly echoing steps faded down the corridor.

James remained sitting there, surrounded by the dim light and damp rock. It worried him how tempting Jaxx's offer sounded. He knew he could never join a dangerous criminal like Jaxx, of course, and yet, the man really could tell him everything he wanted to know about

his past. Could he really reunite James with his father? That was likely a false promise, but one that felt very tempting. James couldn't help but wonder. As friendly as Sam and Liana and the others had been with him, they still had held back valuable information. Purposely lied to him. And James was still no closer to understanding why his hand had burned when he conjured magic, or why he had a Sacre Trigger Switch embedded in him.

There was so much more to learn about himself. And not just his past. He was starting to realise that maybe everyone was right about him; that he was different, somehow. It was strange that he would feel stronger, more energetic, when he was at his most exhausted. The harder he trained, the harder he could go. Both Evan and Sam had spoken about the draining effects of magic, not to mention the physical trials they'd all been through in the past few days. And yet, while they'd all been injured, fatigued, both mentally and physically exhausted, James had somehow been all the better for it.

The echoes of the dripping water felt like a mocking taunt now. As if they were daring him to stop it. James tightened his fists, feeling a resolve come over him. He was sick of being so helpless.

He decided that he wouldn't wait to be rescued. He would get himself out of this mess. He stood up.

His injuries and bruises throbbed as he paced around the room, but he was feeling rested and better already.

Now, what could he do? He had been okay with summoning a Light Shield so far, although that wouldn't do him much good there. He considered trying to summon Fire magic again, but if he failed like before, there would be no one to heal his hand.

He paced the room some more, his sandals splashing through the shallow pool of water, and looked around. The two guards outside stood motionless, ignoring him.

James balled his fists as he thought furiously. A painful spasm shot through his wounded side. He paused, pressing a hand to his side, and had the beginnings of an idea. One that sent a frightened chill through him.

The iron forge looked eerily quiet. There were some scorch marks on the earth and patches of what could have been dried blood, hastily cleaned, but it did not look like a place that had seen a battle just hours earlier. Jaxx had done well to cover up the damage.

Sam looked over the cloudy sky and searched for any newscraft or lawcraft that might still be lingering, watching the forge for any more excitement. All that moved was a passing Spreader, the small disc quietly sending its cooling mist into the air.

Liana shifted beside him, crouched behind the low wall of the roof. Her large Maldrinn blade was strung over her back, twisted at an angle in their low position. They had settled themselves on one of the nearest buildings to the forge, which now stood around fifty feet ahead of them, and reached up to more than twice their height. Five other soldiers made up their team. Eight others were on the nearby buildings, and there were five more soldiers in the ground team, with Evan. The remaining soldiers were spread out around the area, some holding back in the outlying streets. Many carried heavy pistols and rifles, and some would stay on the roofs and fire well-chosen shots. They still could not risk killing people that may be under a mind-controlling influence, but they could disarm and incapacitate.

"We go one at a time," Liana said to them, facing ahead, "But quickly. Are you ready?" The others nodded around her.

Sam ran over their formation in his head. Liana's team would take the inside of the tower and apprehend Jaxx. Once the battle was under way, Sam and Evan would focus on finding James. The other Oneron would control the fight, keeping the guards disarmed, and ensure it doesn't go into the town towards innocent civilians.

"Fray," Liana said to the tall soldier beside her. "Take first jump. To the fourth level. Aris, you follow onto the fifth. Thoroau, sixth level, followed by Roke on the seventh. Sam, you take the third and I'll take the top. Get yourselves into position and wait for me. The other teams will advance the moment I leave this building. And be on your guard. It's too quiet out there."

The stern-looking soldier by her, Fray, shifted position to look over the wall, a hand by the sword on his back. In a flash, he hopped up on the low wall and shot himself forward. As he streaked through the air towards the forge tower, gunfire burst from one of the walkway windows. Fray's Light Shield ignited and blocked the shots, but one bolt struck him on the side. He twisted in the air, his shield disappearing, and spun towards the ground like a ragdoll. Sam saw three other guards with rifles appear through small windows on the tower.

Enraged, Liana called out the advance. She dove off the building, followed by the other soldiers. Sam took off with them. They all soared through the air, heading towards their target. Swords were drawn and grapple hooks released. More shots came from the tower on different levels, thudding against Light Shields. Sam saw Liana aim downwards, towards Fray on the ground, while other soldiers shot their grapple hooks at girders above to swing to different levels.

Sam cut out his Light Shield up as he dropped onto one of the lower walkways. Two men in heavy armour came out from doorways several feet away to his side with large pistols drawn. Sam deflected two shots with his sword as he rushed forward and came to the first guard, cutting the pistol in two and then shoving the man over the railing. The second man was farther away from him but raised his pistol. Sam hopped onto the railing to avoid the gunshots that thudded near him, then pushed himself against the opposite wall and shot down towards the man. Sam closed in with his sword spinning, and sliced the man across

the side, cutting through his plated armour. He finished with a heavy kick across the man's face, knocking him down.

Two more guards exited a doorway behind him. A rush of wind came from the side as an Oneron soldier landed on the walkway and took on the guards. Another soldier flew passed, heading up. Sam looked down to see Evan's team charging towards the forge, and more guards rushing out to meet them.

One soldier went to Liana, who was hunched over the downed Fray, and helped him to stand. Around the forge, Oneron leaped through the air, throwing bolts of Light magic and deflecting shots with their shields. Only some of them carried Maldrinn's, Sam saw. The ones that were fully trained with them. The others would be better suited to standard longswords, while some carried the smaller variants of Maldrinn's, like James had been given.

Sam hopped onto the railing and pushed himself up to the next walkway. He flipped over the next railing, grabbing a guard as he spun, and threw him over the edge as he landed. A tall man in bulky dark armour charged at Sam with two electrically charged batons raised. Sam blocked his heavy attacks, the impacts throwing out sparks. Sam ducked low and grabbed the man's chest armour, and pushed them both upwards. He slammed the man against the underside of the upper walkway, which shuddered and cracked, and then threw him back down as he landed. The man stirred, huffing quietly, before his head dropped.

Shots pinged off the railing beside him. Sam ducked and spun to see another guard coming to him from the other end. He bent to a knee and ignited his Light Shield, blocking several more shots, and then fired the shield outwards in a pulse. The energy struck the guard and sent him flipping backwards. As the man rose back to his feet, singed leather armour smoking, he brought out a side sword. Sam came to him and blocked the feeble attack, then cut the man across both legs.

Catching his breath, Sam took a moment to bite back the pain rippling through him. His old wounds were far from gone, but he would have to try and ignore the lingering reminders. This would have been easier if he could just cut through all the enemies, not worrying about killing anyone; but they couldn't risk killing innocent people. Maiming and concussing them however, was acceptable. However, as Sam well knew, death was a part of any war scenario.

The battle went on below. Evan threw out a blast of wind that threw back several armed guards. Oneron soldiers leapt and flipped around the guards as they cut them down. Energy blasts flew down from the Oneron with rifles up on the rooftops. A soldier was somersaulting through the air and raining down Light Bolts, the beams striking guards and exploding on the ground where they hit. Liana was gone, likely inside the forge by now.

Sam focused back at the nearest doorway on his walkway. James was somewhere inside the forge, waiting for them to find him. Sam just hoped that Jaxx had enough sense to keep him alive.

