

Chapter Thirty Eight - Offense and Defense - Part One

Evan screamed.

A whirlwind of air burst in front of them, swirling with a fierce blue light. Bullets and electric blasts struck the wind with explosive impacts and rippled like pebbles dropped in water. James stumbled back as several blasts made their way through, thudding on the ground or pinging off walls far behind them. He saw Evan standing with his feet planted, arms up over his head, eyes squeezed shut and tears flowing out from his intense concentration.

Sam shot into the sky and sailed high over the wall of wind. His Light Shield appeared over his arm and he twisted in the air, blocking dozens of shots as he entered the battlefield. Evan cried out with exhaustion and his legs buckled.

James drew his sword over his back as Evan collapsed on the ground. The wind disappeared instantly. Most gunfire had stopped or refocused on Sam, who now darted between several riflemen, swinging his sword.

"Evan," James called as he reached him.

Evan panted heavily, sweat dripping from his brow. The sudden expenditure of magic looked to have depleted his strength - right when they needed him the most.

Sam leapt high into the air and threw down a fireball at the nearest rifleman, striking the man's arm and dropping his gun. Twisting in the air, he evaded several more shots before throwing down fireballs at another three riflemen.

Deafening gunshots exploded on the ground near James and zipped by him, causing him to duck and stumble. The nearest guards were on a raised platform to the side, at the base of one of the smaller towers. As they fired at him again, James cried out and raised an arm defensively. The bullets struck a disc of Light that burst to life over his arm. The impacts shook his bones and pushed him back, his feet skidding through the dirt. James steadied himself and paused, both proud and shocked at summoning the shield, before realising that a guard was rushing towards him.

The man raised a heavy pistol at him, a long knife in his other hand. He wore heavy chest and shoulder guards, the armour covering most of his torso, while his burly arms were bare. A fierce look was in his eyes.

James readied his sword and stepped away from Evan, who remained panting on the ground. He brought his sword up as the man fired at him, and bullets struck the wide blade. One of the shots grazed James's ear and he jerked away in shock and sharp pain.

James ducked under the swinging knife as the man came to him. His sword caught the man across the chest and dug deep into the armour, drawing blood. He stumbled back as the

man dropped and clutched at his chest. The new sword Liana had given him still seemed far too large, but its power felt good in his hands.

Several more gunshots pinged by James's head. He spun towards a new set of riflemen and summoned his Light Shield. He braced for impacts that never came, and realised that all the shots must have somehow missed him.

Evan was finally on his feet, resting on his broadsword. It was only then that James saw the blade had changed colour, and was now a dark-grey; almost black. Possibly another Voarn trick with sorcery, he guessed. Evan's pained and weary expression remained, though there was a determination to him as he raised his sword high.

"For Therapia!" Evan cried. He broke into a strained run, deflecting several shots with his darkened sword.

James wiped blood from his stinging ear and forced himself into a run, following Evan. Jaxx was nowhere to be seen. His guards were everywhere; dozens on the walkways of the tower and many more on the ground. A jolt of fear gripped James, seeing all the enemies rushing towards them, but he willed himself to focus and grit his teeth. All he could do was barrel through as many guards as he could before his luck ran out.

Flames ignited ahead, lighting the battlefield in red flashes, as Sam added more magic to his attacks. An electric blast struck the ground near James, throwing up plumes of dirt. The smell of burnt earth filled the air. He dove over a second blast that sailed under him and hit the ground with a roll, then shot himself back to his feet. Flashbacks of the Training Grid came to him and he felt lighter than ever. Always keep moving.

Evan engaged two sword-wielding guards while Sam cut through several more. Now they were in the middle of the battle, surrounded by enemies. As he blocked a swinging staff and shoved a guard back, James looked saw that many of the riflemen were down. But there were men everywhere, seeming to appear from all around.

They had grossly underestimated how many guards Jaxx had.

A solid object rammed into James and knocked him sideways through the air. He hit the ground in a startled daze, his muscles burning and a throbbing ache in his shoulder. He turned to see a large, grey-skinned man stepping closer. He was at least eight feet tall, heavily muscled, and wore light armour that could have passed as padded clothing. A dull metal plate embedded with studs covered his domed head, making James wonder what had happened to him. His heavy brow was tense over his beady black eyes. In his hand was a curved short-sword, which looked more like a massive cleaver.

Scrambling up, James took his attacking stance and planted his feet, readying himself. The grey-skinned man towered over him and swung his sword fiercely.

James sidestepped from the attack and attempted to strike out, but the large man wheeled on him and swung again. James blocked with his sword and staggered sideways from the impact. He stumbled and spun around, turning his momentum into a spinning kick that caught the man on his thick jaw. The grey man followed with a series of strikes that James ducked and weaved around. He knew better than to try to block his heavy attacks again.

James realised he could utilise his speed against the huge man. He thought about moving as he had seen Liana do. Like Sam did. He was an Oneron, after all, and it was time he acted like one.

Another burst of flames crashed nearby, telling him that Sam was still in the fight. He had lost track of Evan, but was unable to switch his focus. Their priority had to be stopping the transport ships from taking off, but at the moment James had a big, grey-skinned problem.

The man lunged forward and James launched himself into the air. He flipped overhead and his sword sliced across the man's back, cutting through his padded jacket. As James landed, the man's backhand caught him across the chin. The force flipped James sideways and he hit the ground. A large boot came up and slammed down, narrowly missing James as he rolled away. His vision spun as pain flared through his face.

The man brought his short sword down in a wide arc, and, still on the ground, James dove towards him. He rolled between the man's legs and brought his sword up, slicing across his inner thigh. He yelled out and fell to his knees as James rose. The man remained with his back to him. On his knees, he still stood almost as tall as James.

James approached with his sword raised, but did not know how to proceed. Should he finish him off? Could he? They couldn't ignore the possibility that Jaxx's men might all be under a mind control.

The man wheeled around, his short-sword flashing. James quickly raised his sword to block but the impact was so surprisingly strong that it sent him flying through the air. His head struck the earth as his legs wheeled over him and he collapsed, rolling and coming to a stop in a thick cloud of dust.

Gunfire rang out and shots thudded into the earth near him. James rolled away frantically, but didn't know where they were coming from. More shots aimed for him as the grey-skinned man raised his sword for his next attack, and bullets popped into the man's chest and torso. He faltered, stunned for a moment, and then dropped to his knees with blood spreading over this jacket.

James pushed himself to his feet and prepared to call his Light Shield, looking for the nearest riflemen. Maybe he just had to stay near the guards and hope they would get caught in the cross-fire more.

Evan fought with two guards behind him. James headed for the transport ships, forcing himself to focus and stay strong.

Evan sliced his sword across the shins of one guard, then evaded the attack that came from the other. The long knife at the end of the swinging polearm swung through the air where his head had been. His foe had a full metal arm that Evan found very curious, although he didn't spare a moment to think of anything but the battle. Ducking under another swipe, Evan came up and swung his sword across the man's chest, cutting into his armoured torso. He shoved the man to the ground with his sword and left him there. If the man would pose another threat, Evan would deal with him again, but there was an urgent feeling that he could not shake. A trembling in his bones. Those transport ships were readying to take off, and he needed to get to them.

He charged towards the two ships, needing to cover over sixty yards across the battlefield. James engaged with two sword-guards while Sam, to the side, leapt around a group of riflemen with his sword swinging. A flash of metal came into view before something knocked Evan across the head and sent him sprawling back, dazed.

He pushed himself to his feet and saw he had been hit by a staff that continued to spin through the air as it wound back to the reaching gloved hand of Jaxx's bodyguard. The short alien – standing a little taller than Evan - had his long mane tied back, and the bristled fur on his shins and forearms wavered in the wind. The metal staff he carried was comprised of several sections, and looked very technical to Evan, like a complicated mechanical device. The bodyguard's slanted eyes and snout gave him a wolf-like appearance.

Evan recalled the documentation on Jaxx and his bodyguards, remembering this one was called Vogri, and that death and murder littered his record. He would be glad to rid the galaxy of a vile killer such as this.

Evan readied his sword and charged. The enemy was startlingly quick. The metal staff twirled around rapidly, giving the impression of a solid spinning disc, as Evan weaved and stepped around the wolf-man, striking when he had a chance.

The staff spun towards him as the wolf-man lashed out. Evan blocked a succession of quick attacks and struck out, but his opponent back flipped away. Evan swung low, sending the enemy jumping up again, which he had anticipated, and he quickly swung upwards. The wolf-man twisted in the air and surprisingly evaded Evan's sword with great dexterity, and his staff struck Evan across the chin. Evan staggered back, pain flaring in his jaw.

He caught a sharp sensation of a powerful magic source nearby. No, not nearby, inside him. The demon had stirred, perhaps sensing Evan's physical pain. He regained his focus enough to see the wolf-man's next attack.

The staff extended as it hit the ground, and the wolf-man pushed off the lengthening staff. His flying kick sailed past Evan, who dodged while swinging outwards, just missing the enemy's head.

The wolf-man leered at Evan, panting softly. "You are good, young one." A heavy accent twisted his words with a snarling tone.

Evan strode forward, raising his sword. "You know," he said. "I believe you are the worthiest opponent I have faced on this world."

"And the last," the wolf-man said. He twirled the staff around his body in an impressive blur and lunged forward. Evan parried the attack and unleashed a series of swipes that his opponent ducked and stepped around.

The sounds of weapons clashing and charging footsteps rang out across the grounds, mixed with the roar of rifle shots and explosive impacts, but there was another sound in the air that Evan could detect. The whirring of engines firing up. The transport ships had finished loading and were preparing to take off.

Evan pulled back and readied another attack. He assessed his body and mind, and was not sure if he was ready for more sorcery. Though he had been ready to instantly summon that wall of wind, it still jarred his body more than he had thought it would. He hoped he would have the chance to thank Melida for her fast summoning technique.

He met the wolf-man in a clash of weapons. They stepped and spun around each other, before pushing away.

Reisa flashed into Evan's mind. He blinked back the image and faltered.

The vision had bombarded him with a multitude of emotions and memories that caused Evan to drop to his knees, his mind swimming. Every sensation, every feeling – everything Reisa – had just struck him, hard. He heaved and tried to steady himself, his heart pounding. His entire body shook with uncontrolled emotion.

He looked up to see the wolf-man walking towards him, but he found the source of the vision across the battlefield. Higero Jaxx stood on the second level walkway of the main tower, glaring at Evan.

Evan stumbled to his feet, still feeling the after effects of the intense emotions. The wolf-man came up to him. Evan turned to strike - and faced his father. King Goodheart stood before him, a solemn look on his bearded face. His heavy cloak, the jewels adorning his royal tunic, everything was so real. His father's heady musk sent a shiver through him. The sudden shock of familiarity froze him.

King Goodheart lashed out and a staff struck Evan across the face. Pain exploded as Evan hit the ground hard. He rolled onto his back and blinked back his focus, now seeing the wolf-man in place of his father. He forced himself to roll away, his dull senses telling him that somehow, Jaxx was manipulating his mind.

The wolf-man's snout shifted as he grinned at him, perhaps enjoying seeing him stunned and confused.

Evan willed himself to fight through the false visions and cried out as he lunged forward. Reisa now stood before him, small and slight, and stunning. Her large, heavy-lidded eyes shuddered with fright; soft lips parted with wonder. She wore the same shorts and top from that day in Moon Bay. The sounds of battle shifted, and Evan turned to see he was now surrounded by other people.

Where Jaxx's men and Evan's companions had been, many Voarn stood in their place. Nat, Rikan, Jubile, and Marassy fought with swords and staffs or fired rifles, alongside the old guardsmen from Evan's castle. His uncles and cousins clashed with local townsfolk. Some of them were elderly or inept, but all fought like soldiers. Evan's heart jumped at the sight of his mother, lying dead among many other bodies. His bruised face throbbed and he felt the stinging sensation of blood dripping down his temple.

Reisa charged at him with a staff. He managed to bring his sword up to intercept, but Reisa's angry grimace made him pause. The staff spun low and his legs were knocked under him, dropping him to the ground.

Reisa stood over him, glaring with a fierce scowl that tore at his insides. Evan just wanted her to love him, like he loved her. Old feelings of affection and not being good enough swelled over him. He blinked back tears.

This wasn't real. He knew it wasn't real. But a part of him wished it were, so that he could be around Reisa one more time.

She raised the metal staff over her head. "You were never good enough," she said, disgust distorting her voice.

Evan wilted instantly. Reisa's last words came back to him. *You are one of the good ones, Evan.* That creature had taken her mind soon after, and his friend had ceased to exist. Just like the person in front of him did not exist. Anger burned through him. He tried to rise, but his sword felt incredibly heavy and his muscles ached.

The world skewed and blurred. Reisa brought the staff down with a harsh cry. A bearded figure in robes barged into her with great velocity. She flew back as the old figure landed beside Evan.

The old Voarn huffed and wheezed, turning to Evan. The Elder Cenasure's deep-set milky eyes regarded Evan with great sincerity. Seeing the wisest man from his homeland brought a renewed strength to him. He remembered the encouragement and perception the Elder had bestowed on him, and the motivation he had felt at the time. Suddenly he was filled with hope and determination, as he had been when he left his home in search of help.

"Evan," Elder Cenasure said. "Come back. It's me." His gravelly voice was the same, but the words were not his.

Evan blinked back his focus and felt another presence before him. "James," Evan said.

The Elder nodded and helped him to stand. Evan looked up and saw James Island standing before him. His mind spun as reality righted itself.

The battlefield seemed far emptier now, with only several guards left standing and fewer bodies on the ground. Where had all the guards gone?

"Evan," James said. "You were shouting names. You okay?"

Footsteps came from behind and their situation came back to Evan. James shoved him aside and brought his sword up to intercept the wolf-man's staff. Evan saw James deftly block three quick strikes and then swipe with the knife at the end of his hilt, catching the enemy across his side and slicing through his vest. The wolf-man fell and rolled away, leaving spots of blood on the ground.

Evan marvelled at James's movements, hardly recognising the man he saw.

"Go," James said to him. "I'll take care of this guy."

Evan found himself smiling, and when he stepped forward, he felt a fresh burst of strength channel through him. He placed a hand on James's shoulder. "I will finish this one. You make sure those ships do not take off."

James hesitated, looking uncertain. Evan nodded reassuringly, and James nodded back.

"Good luck," James said, and rushed off.

Above them, on top of one of the connecting tunnels, Sam swung his sword at several guards. Evan saw more guards exiting from the iron forge.

Jaxx was no longer on the walkway. Evan promised himself he would not fall for his illusion tricks again, and would make sure that Jaxx paid for conjuring the ghosts of his past.

He turned towards the wolf-man, who had risen to his feet several paces away with a hand on his bloodied side. They readied their weapons and charged at each other.