

Chapter Forty Three: Dark Forces - Part Two

Rock faces and sparse shrubs streamed by Sam's cockpit. He aimed the craft under an arching rock formation and shot over a low rise. Jaxx's large transport ship careened through the canyon a hundred feet ahead, sputtering smoke from a dented exhaust port from an earlier collision among the rocks. Jaxx had thought to lose Sam by flying into the canyon. While Sam's ship was faster and more manoeuvrable, he couldn't be sure he would reach Jaxx in time.

Sam checked the time on a display. He'd been in the air for over four minutes now, giving him less than two minutes before Jaxx could blow the bomb.

He would've killed for an external cannon, but a passenger craft wouldn't carry any weapons. Jerking his ship up, he cleared a cluster of jagged rocks and gave himself more room higher up. Anti-flying radars might pick him up, but a law violation was the least of his concerns right then.

He closed in on Jaxx from above, getting steadily closer. There was only one move for him to make, and he would have to be careful. Jaxx's ship was heavier and more than three times the size of Sam's short-ranger. He couldn't guarantee his ship would hold if-

Sam spun sideways away from a pointed rock, and the underside of his craft caught on the sharp point with a shrieking scrape.

Keeping control of his spiralling, Sam dove the ship downwards. He shot towards Jaxx's transport ship and slammed into his side. Everything jolted and sparks shot out from the collision. Jaxx's ship rocked and its backside struck a protruding rock, sending an explosion of rock and metal into the air.

Sam yanked to the side and then slammed back into Jaxx. His cockpit window shattered and the front side of his craft crumpled, a large metal sheet falling away. Hot desert air streamed into the craft and whipped his hair. Alarms blazed over the dashboard, lights flashing damage reports.

Jaxx's ship careened to the side and the front edge struck the ground, digging into the earth. Sam struggled to regain control of his damaged craft, feeling the handles fight against him.

He had less than a minute left.

The large transport ship struck something hard under the ground and jolted, rising up and suddenly overturning in the air. It crashed upside down, screeching through the earth with sand and dirt bursting into the air.

Sam's ship spun away, smoke billowing from his crumpled front. With the ship heading to the ground, he climbed onto the dashboard and stepped through the shattered cockpit

window. Steadying himself, he launched himself into the air as the spiralling craft struck the ground and exploded behind him.

He landed beside Jaxx's downed ship and stumbled through the sandy ground. Blood poured down his head and he realised he'd hit his head in the craft at some point.

They had landed on a rock ledge that ended around fifty feet away on Sam's right. The far-off sand dunes could be seen past the cliff edge, which must have been several hundred feet below.

Sam reached for his sword as he came to the upturned ship, wiping the blood and sweat from his brow. He kicked at a large window, shattering it, and looked inside. Jaxx was gone.

Rounding the ship, he saw Jaxx rushing away, detonator in hand. Sam broke into a run and then leapt towards him. He landed close and shoulder barged into Jaxx, who sprawled onto the ground. The detonator tumbled from his hand. Sam raised his sword threateningly and stepped closer.

"You are persistent," Jaxx said, breathing heavily. Sweat stains covered the fine shirt under his jacket. "It is an admiral trait, General." He reached out for the detonator.

Sam dashed forward - and stumbled through the thick undergrowth of a forest.

He caught himself against a tree and scanned the area. His head swam with dizziness, heart pounding in his chest. He knew it was an illusion, and yet it felt so real. The earthy air, the buzzing insects; sun beams cutting through the dense collection of heart trees. He swallowed, fighting back the welling of emotions he had felt so long ago. He knew the forest well, and that his older brother would not be far away.

No! Sam screamed internally, squeezing his fists. He swung his sword out furiously, stepping and turning, releasing his frustrations and anger with harsh cries. The rocky ledge came back to him in an instant.

Jaxx was on his knees several paces away, taking hold of the detonator. Sam darted forward and kicked his hand, sending the device spiralling away to hit the ground close to the edge of the cliff.

The world jolted, the surrounding rocks warping and smearing in his view. Sam steadied himself. His head throbbed with an intense pressure.

He realised Jaxx was coming for him. Sam raised a hand but couldn't block the coming punch in time, and a fist struck his temple. Shocking pain exploded in Sam's mind. He staggered back, reeling from the overwhelming force. Jaxx was on him again, and a punch to the torso keeled Sam over. He dropped his sword and hit the ground on his hands and knees, spitting blood and panting heavily, his mind swirling with chaos. He couldn't fathom how Jaxx was so physically strong.

An urgent beeping rang in the air. The button on the detonator was flashing. Jaxx's shoes shifted through the dirt as he headed for it.

Sam rubbed his sore temple, wiping more blood from his face, and picked up his sword with a bloody hand as he got to his feet. He thought he could feel a burning energy emanating from the sword, surging through his arm and into his body, but in the moment he could hardly be sure of anything. As he staggered forward, he grimaced and cried out as crippling pain in his ribs took his breath. Jaxx's punches had broken his ribs, and possibly caused internal bleeding.

"Your time is up, General," Jaxx said to him, coming to the detonator.

Sam's legs had little strength as he stumbled towards Jaxx, just a few paces away now. His entire body was shutting down; fighting against him.

Jaxx had a hand on the device. He just had to press the button. Sam stumbled forward and allowed himself to fall towards Jaxx. He cried out, gripping his sword with both hands, and plunged it down into Jaxx's thigh as he fell.

Jaxx screamed towards the sky and fell beside Sam at the edge of the cliff. On the ground next to him, Sam swung an arm out and smacked the detonator from his hand, which hit the ground several feet away, teetering on the cliff edge. Jaxx huffed and sputtered, turning to look for the beeping device, Sam's sword still in his thigh. He groaned as he dragged his body through the dirt with his arms, smearing a trail of blood.

Sam fought through the exhaustion in his body as he rolled over and reached out for Jaxx, also dragging himself along the ground. His broken ribs pulsed with a crippling, blinding pain as he reached out, his hand finding the edge of Jaxx's shoe. The arms dealer turned back to him and raised an arm, pointing a finger at him.

"Blight take you!" Jaxx hissed.

Sam's mind exploded. His vision blurred and heat pounded through his skull. Within the maelstrom of the spinning world around him, the sharp pain lancing through him, the detonator continued to ring out. It echoed as if it filled the entire world, boring into Sam's head.

Sam reached out again, his fingers grabbing Jaxx's jacket. He used his remaining strength to tighten his hold of Jaxx with both hands and pull him closer. They lay beside each other in the dirt, Sam close to the edge of the cliff, the blaring detonator just above them. He pulled himself up to face Jaxx, who had an outstretched arm towards the detonator. Rage and exhaustion left Sam with a harsh cry as he threw his head into Jaxx. Their skulls cracked against each other and they both stilled.

Sometime later – it could have been seconds or hours - Sam stirred, realising he had blacked out. His mind slowly came back to him, the throbbing pain loosening like a great

weight leaving him. A soft wind beat on his back, reminding him the cliff edge was right near him.

Besides him, Jaxx's chest was slowly moving up and down, but he remained still. His suit was frayed, bloodied and smeared with dirt and sweat. A heavy indent was on his scaled head. Sam was sure he had cracked his skull.

The detonator had stopped beeping and the world was very quiet.

Sam rolled himself away from the cliff edge, feeling the strength return to his body. It was over. Jaxx was done. The thoughts were dull and distant, as if they belonged to someone else's victory. His ribs were no longer broken – most of his severe injuries must have been an illusion from Jaxx. Keeping his face up towards the sky, he brought his sat-com out and keyed Liana.

Her voice came urgently through the speaker.

"I got the detonator," Sam told her. "It's over."

"Oh, Sam," she said, breathing a heavy sigh of relief. "Are you okay?"

"I'll live. Do me a favour, lock onto my sat-com and send a ship over for me and Jaxx. We'll be waiting here for you."

"I'll have a ship on its way soon. We're clearing out the last of the resistance here."

"James?"

She sighed again, this time with frustration. "Still no sign. We'll find him, Sam."

"Let me know as soon as you have him."

"I will. Good work, Sam." She cut the transmission.

Sam forced himself to sit up. He spat blood onto the hot earth, and cursed himself James was still out there somewhere, and Sam had got himself lost out in the desert. But they had Jaxx now, at least.

A spinning kick came for James's head. He ducked and lunged forward, connecting two punches to the man's face before an elbow shot out and caught him on the forehead. They both staggered back from each other.

James faltered and fell to a knee. He coughed and saw specks of blood spatter on the ground. He no longer felt his body; no longer felt anything. Somehow there was still

strength in him, pushing him on, and he wasn't even sure any more where it was coming from.

The air had cooled within the shaft they had fallen in. Or so he'd thought. He could no longer smell the rusting metals and the light beams cutting into the large shaft seemed to wane as his body shut down.

"Time's up," the enemy Oneron said, stepping closer. Their weapons gone, all that remained was the two of them.

James willed another surge of adrenaline through him and leapt up. He threw a heavy punch towards the man that was easily sidestepped. James reared back another punch but a knee shot out and struck him in the gut. He keeled over and hit the ground. He looked up in time to see a boot swing up to his face.

His vision blurred as pain shot through him. When he looked up, he saw he was on his back. Blood and sweat pooled beneath him, his bare torso a mess of bruises and cuts. The Oneron stood over him.

"You just don't give up, do you?" the man said with heavy breaths. The burned side of his face oozed dark blood. "But the verdict is out. You're doing a good thing, removing your unworthy self from the galaxy. We will be stronger without you."

He grabbed a fistful of James's hair and yanked him up to his eye level. "I thank you, for allowing me to test you."

James swayed uneasily. It took all his remaining strength just to stand.

There was a sad set to the man's eyes as he regarded James. A quick punch to the stomach took James's breath and almost sent him back to the ground.

Hands groped around James's blood-slicked torso. With a grunt, the man lifted him overhead with straight arms. James's arms and legs hung limply, his head swimming with dizziness. Being held up made him feel so helpless. He struggled to shake himself free but realised his body was no longer responding.

A rush of air took his breath as he they suddenly launched into the air. The Oneron's jump shot them up through the tall shaft. Platforms and wall lights flashed by James's blurred vision.

With what was left of his pained mind, fury boiled through him, steaming like a hot blade in water. He had been helpless for so long, blindly led by others. Now this Oneron was sending him to his death. And James still had no say about it.

Their ascent slowed as they neared the peak of the jump. James desperately struggled against the man's hold, but still had no strength in him. No strength; but there was still fight in him. Whatever had allowed him to keep fighting after so much damage and exhaustion

had been fading for some time, but it was still there. Somehow, James knew that he would have to open himself to it fully, if he was to survive this moment.

They were held in the air a moment, before the Oneron swung his arms down, and then James was falling. Air rushed over him, his arms flailing helplessly as he plummeted back to the ground.

The Oneron above began falling towards him. He had James's father's grapple hook in his hand.

James flushed with anger and fury. Arms tensed, legs locked, his head shot up, suddenly filled with clarity. Something coursed through him, channelling itself outward. The power shook his bones, burning him from the inside.

James cried out with everything he had. A black energy exploded out from him, filling his vision. Filling the entire shaft in a pillar of tumultuous darkness. Walls shook and broke apart. The Oneron became consumed within the explosive blast, along with everything else.

The world burned with darkness, and James became lost within it.

Evan had been preparing the next wave of sorcery from his sceptre. He remained outside the forge, calling out orders to the Oneron soldiers. The battle was nearing an end, but he had been unable to shake a troubling feeling that echoed in his bones. Around him, Oneron swung on their grapple hooks and leapt through the air, throwing down sorcery on the remaining guards.

The thrumming energy from within the tower built up to an impossibly large scale. Evan charged up the sceptre but held back his next attack, pausing to look up at the forge. A shiver ran through him.

"Fall back!" he shouted, but it was too late.

Explosions of black energy burst from the tower, roiling with stormy clouds. The pulsing blasts funnelled upwards through the tower, breaking huge sections apart as it erupted out the top. Thick black clouds dispersed from the crumbling tower. The light around them darkened as if the sun had gone out.

Oneron soldiers were dark stains against the breaking tower as they dove off walkways. Dozens of Jaxx's guards were thrown to the ground.

The power was greater than anything Evan had ever known.