

## Chapter Twenty Eight: The Iron Forge - Part One

They were crouched on a roof overlooking the Riondon Iron Forge. The main tower reached up over a dozen levels, narrowing gradually and leading to a flat peak at the very top. Large sheets of copper-coloured panels made up the exterior of the tower, with small round windows at various points. Metal walkways, stairs and ladders ran around the perimeter. It looked to Evan to be well traversable from the outside. On either side were two shorter towers, like smaller imitations of the main one that reached about two thirds its height. They connected to the main tower via two walkways that housed corridors, which could be seen through various windows along the connecting tunnels.

The sun overhead was overbearing and insistent, leaving little wind as Evan squatted beside Liana Khallo, looking over a low wall on the roof of a building two hundred yards from the forge.

"There is a front and back entrance on the ground level," Liana said, resting a hand on the hilt of the sword on her belt. "And several access ports around the outer frameworks of the tower. Those will be our best point of entry. There are some guards stationed along the perimeter, even at a high level, but they are few and far between and don't linger for long. Jaxx doesn't want the forge to look *too* protected."

"You are familiar with the layout inside?" Evan asked.

Liana shook her head. "We have an idea based on architectural records of the old forge, but not of any changes Jaxx may have made since buying it. Our satellite imagery only picked up life sources." She turned to Evan and paused, before adding, "There are likely security cameras inside, and we will be spotted, eventually, even if no one sees us while we're there. I don't plan on ever returning to the iron forge so it makes little difference if they have my face on record. Are you okay with that?"

"I am very far from home," Evan told her. "I do not have any intentions of staying on this planet, or even this system, for longer than I need to. And I do not care for hiding my actions."

Liana regarded him with a blank, yet subtly intense expression and nodded. She had a way about her, Evan thought. A stern air that held a solid resolution. She reminded him of Sam, in the way that her expressions were hard to read.

Evan looked back towards the tower. "Where do you suggest we enter from?"

Liana pointed ahead, a little below them. "Right before the tower starts to narrow, the upper levels start there, by that porthole. The first few floors might as well be opened to the public, the exposure they've had from local newscasts, so there won't be anything hiding or worth finding there. Underground has forges and generators, no room for hidden

floors, unless Jaxx has got really creative. That leaves the upper levels for any surprises he might have for us."

"What surprises do you expect to find?" Evan asked.

Liana lightly shrugged a shoulder. The gesture also reminded him of Sam.

"More than the everyday items they've been producing for the public," she said. "Jaxx has been known for a few things. Drugs being one of them, as well as the acquisitions and selling of armaments, along with the Trigger Switches, of course."

"I did not think it was possible to sell armaments with their Trigger Switches," Evan said. "Not beyond military organisations."

"You can make rifles and guns of all kinds, but the law says you cannot create Trigger Switches in the same vicinity as the armaments, within a specified distance. The penalties for distributing them together are severe. Only high-level military have some exceptions. But none of that stops our friend Jaxx from dealing with such things, if it makes him a profit."

Evan frowned. The laws against illegal armaments were the most well-known throughout the galaxy. For Jaxx to think to create such weapons meant he truly considered himself a powerful, unstoppable force.

Down below, a shorter building lay to the side, but there was mostly a wide empty space around the tower. "Can you jump this distance to the tower?" Evan asked.

Liana shook her head. "Not quite, but I can make it in two. We can get to that lower building and make our way from there."

The roof of the lower building looked to be around fifty feet below them, and at a good distance ahead.

"Can you reach that roof?" Liana asked, eyeing him carefully.

It had taken her two jumps to reach the top of this building, while Evan had to launch himself from several window ledges, using his Wind sorcery to push himself up. It had been quite taxing for him, having never used his sorcery to propel himself in such a way, and it wasn't quite the same as an Oneron and their jumps, but he felt he had handled himself well without holding her back.

In a way, the new use of his Wind sorcery thrilled him. And he was thankful at least that his time with the Oneron had allowed him to discover a new level of his sorcery. He didn't think he would have been able to perform such a feat back home. A part of Evan was also apprehensive, knowing that his sorcery had increased since he'd fused himself with the demon.

"With sorcery to buffer my landing, I can."

Liana turned and ran low beside the wall, to the corner overlooking the next building. She adjusted the sword on her belt before turning back to the low wall. In a flash she launched herself into the air, her form dark against the bright sky. She fell in a wide arc, eventually landing on the far-off roof below.

Evan readied himself and cast all thoughts out, focusing his mind on his intent. He hopped onto the corner of the low wall, taking in the open air and the small world below for half a second before jumping off. The air rushed over him, loud and angry, his short-cape flapping wildly behind him. He couldn't help but flail his arms and legs, his breath leaving him for a long moment, before he managed to regain his control.

The roof reached up to him fast; very fast. Holding his hands out, a hazy blue air built up before him, swirling and strengthening. His descent faltered a little, with a stomach-churning lurch to start with and then more subtly. The fierce wind pulsed over him before he hit the roof. He landed hard and stumbled, his boots grinding on the gravel. Liana caught him as his legs buckled.

"Impressive," she said. "Are you all right?"

Evan caught his breath, feeling the strength returning to his legs. For a second there he thought he had made a big mistake, attempting such a feat. But there was another sensation as he had channelled that final pulse; a dark energy that ebbed from somewhere deep inside him. Conjuring that sorcery had jolted the spirit within him.

It was the first time he had felt it since he'd merged their souls together. A part of him thought he would feel it again the next time he expelled a high amount of sorcery. The idea troubled him greatly.

He looked up at Liana and nodded.

They approached the edge of the roof and looked over the iron forge tower.

Empty space lay between them and the tower now, the ground around seven levels below them. It would take another jump to reach the tower's mid-level. Liana was studying the tower, watching the guards stationed outside. Several guards in silver uniforms stood on the ground level, and two could be seen along the tower walkways. One was looking over the side, away from them, and another was patrolling, currently facing their direction.

They waited until the patrolling guard turned and became hidden around a corner.

"Good to go?" Liana asked.

Evan gave her an assuring nod and she off was again, shooting instantly into the air in a wide, controlled arc. Evan marvelled at the accuracy of the Oneron and their jumps, unaided by sorcery to help guide their way. At least, not that he was aware of.

He prepared himself and pushed off. His standard jump was meagre compared to the distance he needed to travel, but he propelled himself with a steady stream of sorcerous wind, giving the impression that he was riding on an ethereal, mystical trail of light. As he neared the tower something flickered in his mind and the sorcery faltered. It caused Evan to free fall for a moment before he re-channelled his focus and righted himself.

He flailed as he hit the metal walkway, which shuddered and rang out from his impact. He steadied himself, fighting through the dizziness and nausea. Looking up, he saw he had landed two levels below Liana.

*Enough sorcery for now*, Evan thought, rubbing his eyes and seeing spots. There was only so much he could channel in a short period. And he still didn't fully trust what was inside him.

Liana gestured to a ladder and Evan made his way up to her, his boots clunking softly in the quiet breeze. He went along a walkway and up a set of metal stairs, where she met him at the top.

After checking he was fine, Liana led him up another ladder to a higher level. They paused and remained still for a moment, while she checked that a nearby guard had moved far enough away from them. They soon came to the porthole she had indicated earlier. The silent air felt threatening to Evan; the only sounds were the rattling and grinding of the metal walkways under their steps.

The oval porthole was only a little taller than Evan, meaning Liana had to duck down to enter when they went through. They came out onto a walkway that ran along the walls of the interior. Their position overlooked a multi-levelled area, with several other walkways and platforms above them. The metal walls, a dull green and cream, went up to the far-off ceiling. It gave him the impression of a giant stairwell shaft that must have covered five levels.

The hot air was strong with a sharp, metallic scent that Evan could almost taste. It reminded him of an old metal polish and, in a way, the smell of blood. A faint thrumming of machinery came from somewhere beyond the walls, and the distant echoes of footsteps on metal.

Liana gestured and led him along the walkway, up a short metal staircase to a higher platform. They came to an elevator door and Liana pressed the 'up' arrow. Evan felt his apprehensions grow as they waited for the doors to open, constantly looking around and keeping his ears focused on any sounds around them. The doors slid open and they took the elevator up.

Liana checked the small screen on her sat-com as they rode up.

"Do you know where to go?" Evan asked.

"I have a rough idea," Liana said, showing him a blueprint of what he assumed was the forge. "I think."

They came out onto a long corridor that led to a heavily secured metal door at the end. Large windows ran along the sides of the corridor, showing a vast room beyond on either side. When they looked out one of the windows, they saw hundreds of conveyor belts, machines, and furnaces, monitored by dozens of people in shiny grey coats. Metal objects filled the conveyor belts: pipes, cogs, barrels, handles, tubing, many kinds of small and large parts.

Even through the window, Evan could feel the fierce heat from the area beyond. There were dozens of short towers with smoking billowing from the holes in the domed tops. An intense, fiery light glowed from within the towers. Several large mechanical fan systems were along the ceiling, pulling in the smoke from the furnace towers.

"Armaments," Liana said over Evan's shoulder. "No surprises there. They're mass producing weapons. Right in front of everyone. Now the question is, who is their buyer? Jaxx can't possibly use all this weaponry himself."

"He is working for someone," Evan said. "Someone who needs to arm many soldiers."

"Not just weapons. Looks like armour, too."

Liana gestured and they stepped closer to the large door, which had a sign that read *Authorised Access Only*.

Sneaking around like this reminded Evan of his time in the warehouse in Tyken Town, when he, Sam and James had looked through offices and corridors searching for clues that had led them to Higero Jaxx. It felt as though he had come a long way in that time, despite having only been a few days earlier.

Liana pressed her ear to the metal door and paused, listening. The door had no handle or obvious way of opening, besides a keypad beside it. Liana pulled a small device from her belt and pressed it against the buttons of the keypad, below its screen. A light click sounded as the square device attached itself and motors began whirring within it.

"This can determine the unlock code," she told Evan.

He nodded, having assumed as much. They had similar technology back home, although with live cables that entered a device and unlocked it from within. After several seconds, five beeps came from the device and something inside the door unlocked with a hiss. Evan drew his sword and prepared for the door to open. He hesitated when he saw the black sheen - or lack of a shine - of the matte blade.

Liana pulled hard and swung the door open, her other hand on her sword. She paused and relaxed, waving Evan through.

Within was a tight stairwell that took them one level up. The door at the top slid open automatically as they approached. Beyond was a cold, dimly lit room. Metal walls were lined with consoles and cabinets, with a bank of monitors in the centre of the room. A floor to ceiling window on one end overlooked a large, open room beyond.

Movement caught their attention beside them. Evan spun to see a man in a simple shirt and trousers. He had been facing a cabinet with his back to them and now turned, folders in his hands. Alarm widened his eyes and he stiffened.

Liana had her sword drawn. It looked a fine make, with a solid, straight blade that gleamed a golden-silver and had a long handle. Evan kept his lowered, not wanting to overwhelm the situation before he could assess it. A part of him didn't want to bring attention to the dark blade.

"Hold it there," Liana said. "We won't hurt you unless we have to."