

Chapter Forty Three: Dark Forces - Part One

An Oneron soldier fell from the tower with a metal spear embedded in his chest, landing near the body of another fallen soldier. Evan could sense the battle getting away from them. They had been severely outnumbered from the beginning, and the enemy now showed no regard for the destruction their weapons caused. Smoke drifted across the battlefield; scorch marks on the ground that had been cracked and cratered.

Vogri whirled the staff around him and charged towards Evan from across the battlefield. The healing aura from his staff seemed to have restored him with more vigour than before. Evan worried he had been exerting himself too much already, and had to doubt even his own abilities to overcome this enemy. But he had one last trick to try.

He pointed the golden sceptre ahead and channelled his sorcery into it. As Melida had suspected, it appeared to be in tune with the wielder's impulses, and its energy could be summoned at his will. A spinning sphere of red energy grew from the emerald tip of the sceptre. A whirring sound built up, like a starting motor. Evan braced his arm and fired the ball. Vogri vaulted into the air with his extending staff as the energy ball struck the ground, exploding with plumes of dirt and singing the earth. He came down with his staff swinging. Evan brought the sceptre up and blocked the attack, pushing him back. He kept his sword on his back, needing to devote his full focus on the sceptre.

They exchanged a series of attacks, blocking and weaving around each other. It felt strange to use the sceptre like a sword, but it was made of a solid material that worked well to block the staff. At the same time, Evan understood the true power of the sceptre did not lie in channelling offensive light shows. There was more to release from within, if he dared to.

Vogri brought the staff down towards him in a wide arc. The sceptre swung through the empty air as the staff suddenly retracted, then extended again and struck Evan in the chest, shoving him to the ground.

Evan skidded in the dirt, clutching at his bruised chest. He was getting sluggish. And he still had to enter the forge and find James. He had been spending far too long with this one enemy. He couldn't be sure if the staff would keep restoring the wolf-man each time he was knocked down, so he would have to destroy it if he was to defeat him.

An Oneron soldier, swinging through the air, threw down a device that struck the ground by a group of nearby guards. A bubble of electricity expanded over them, white tendrils surrounding their convulsing forms, before they fell.

Evan rose to his feet, ignoring the buzz of the paralysing electricity that heated the air as it blew over him, and gripped the sceptre with both hands. Another Oneron dropped from above with a burning hole in his chest. Evan grimaced at the sight. Even with his focus on Vogri, he could see that, despite their training and skills, these Oneron needed a

commanding voice to lead them, and point out weak spots and where to focus their attacks, or when to hold back. They needed Liana's command.

A thrumming energy emanated from the sceptre, mixed with the dull impulses from Runn. Despite his better judgement - he needed all the help he could get - Evan called upon their forces to fuel his actions. And it gave him an idea.

He began to run, but turned away from Vogri and headed for the overhead passage that connected a smaller building to the tower. His enemy chased after him.

Channelling his sorcery into his hands, Evan unleashed a flood of Wind into the ground. The force pushed him up into the air, hazy white energy swirling around him, and he soared up to land on the roof of the connecting tunnel. A sharp jolt thudded within him; another internal punch. Runn surged with a repressed aggression. Evan fought to master his internal influences, which was especially critical while he held the powerful sceptre. He hoped he was right in choosing to trust Runn, understanding that the demon meant to help him.

Vogri slammed his staff down and extended it, vaulting up to meet him. Evan took the moment his enemy was in the air, and leapt off the tunnel to intercept him. He summoned a burst of Wind into his jump as he slammed into Vogri and threw them both up into the sky. With the sceptre in hand, Evan grabbed hold of Vogri's staff between them. The sorcery pushed them even higher, past the fourth level of the forge. Vogri struggled to gain control of the staff, but Evan held onto it firmly.

"What is this?" Vogri shouted, gritting his teeth with tension.

Evan locked eyes onto him through the swirling sorcery. "Power."

He channelled everything into the sceptre, igniting it with his will. Sorcery drew into the sceptre.

Then he unleashed Runn.

A powerful force flooded through Evan, like a dam bursting, his entire body shivering with unrestrained energy. Dark purple light streamed around them, blurring Evan's convulsing hands. The long staff trembled under his hold, and then shattered. Blinding energy burst from the shards of the staff as the pieces flew out.

Evan threw himself against Vogri, the sceptre in his outstretched arms, his entire body filled with a raging storm. Heavy blue wind struck his enemy, instantly shooting him through the air towards the forge. Vogri flailed before he crashed into the wall of the tower, leaving a dark hole in the reinforced steel and disappearing from sight.

Evan fell back down to the earth. His strength left him as he allowed himself to fall, barely holding on to the sceptre. For a moment he rejoiced in the refreshing wind on his face, and

closed his eyes. It was almost like being back in the fields beyond his family castle, feeling the west wind come from the Obbiwood. For a second he thought he could even hear the sound of children's laughter.

He smiled as he plummeted to the ground.

His body jolted as a large object slammed into him, and he was vaguely aware of falling again. Then suddenly he was on the ground.

Dust swirled around him as he opened his eyes, and saw an Oneron soldier over him. The man, bald with a tanned complexion, knelt in the dirt, holding Evan.

"I got you," the soldier said, short of breath.

Evan's heavy eyes threatened to close, exhaustion taking over him, but a disturbance in the air shocked him to attention. He searched for the incoming attack, but his enemy was nowhere to be seen. The burst of danger subsided, though something lingered in the air and disturbed Evan.

He got to his feet, finding his legs weak, and nodded to the soldier. An explosion across the way shook the ground, sending Oneron soldiers flailing in the air.

Evan grit his teeth. James needed him. But these soldiers were dying.

"Who is in charge here?" Evan demanded.

The soldier blinked at him. "Corporal Prosgo. Up there." He pointed his chin up to a rooftop behind him. Evan saw three soldiers with rifles, firing down over the edge. He sighed. A leader should be leading on the field, not from a far.

Evan jogged closer to the foot of the building, passing two Oneron who were charging into a group of guards. Most of the battle had concentrated near the main doors of the tower. The rooftop, around eight levels up, was too high for him to reach, but he needed to get their attention.

Summoning what was left inside him, he swung an arm out and threw up a gust of wind. The breeze struck the edge of the roof, shaking loose some dirt, and dissipated easily. It was enough to get their attention.

Evan pointed to the iron forge tower as the three men looked down at him with bewildered expressions. "The riflemen," Evan called up. "All soldiers to remove the firepower, first. Starting from the greatest damage. Keep men by the entrance of the main tower and flank attack any more guards that come out."

The three soldiers up there had positioned themselves too far from the main tower to fire effectively at the guards on the walkways. They had focused their attention on the main grounds to protect their men on the field. Evan understood they only meant to incapacitate

and only kill if necessary. Liana had ordered the riflemen to engage conservatively, to control the battle, but they needed to act more on the offensive. And they needed someone to lead them.

The soldier on the roof, whom Evan recalled as Prosgo, looked as though he would argue, but then he nodded with a strong resolve. He gave an order that Evan did not hear, and the two men beside him leapt off the roof towards the forge.

Evan rested on his sword's cross-guard, feeling a great weariness take hold of him. As he took a deep breath and turned back towards the battle, he knew he was where he needed to be. The others would find James, and as much as it pained him that he could not aid in the search, he knew that these soldiers needed him. The lives of everyone remaining needed him on the field. He would not stand by while they captured Jaxx and rescued James, and allowed all their soldiers to be killed in the process.

They needed a leader. They needed a king.

Evan jogged into the battle, willing strength into his limbs. He cut down the legs of a sword-guard, turned and blocked an electrified staff, then countered with a slash across the guard's chest.

As he fought on, he became aware of a great pressure building in the iron forge tower, thrumming in bones and electrifying the air. It had been slowly building for some time, he realised.

Within him, a surge of fear pulsed. As he fought off two more guards, he noticed his nose had started bleeding. The power from the forge became unbearable.

A burst of adrenalin and determination shocked James into action. He pushed himself off the ground, springing to his feet. The enemy Oneron, who had been sitting beside him, was on his feet in an instant.

The great Maldrinn swung at James. He ducked and then back flipped away from the next swing, a sudden burst of adrenaline shoving him into action. He landed and charged into the Oneron, fists flying. James got two good punches in his scarred face, before a rough hand grabbed his shoulder and a sudden head-butt threw him back. He blinked back the dark spots in his vision, and focused in time to see the Oneron whirling towards him.

A flying kick struck his face and James was thrown sideways into the air. He landed hard and skidded to a stop at the end of the corridor. His vision blurred and dull pain burned through his face. When he was able to focus enough, he saw he was near the elevator doors.

Another corridor led away on his side, heading into the main section of the tower. The downed guard was beside him, the large rifle by his side. James reached forward and

grabbed the heavy rifle, raising it towards the Oneron. He pulled the trigger and a heavy blast of blue energy shot out. The Oneron dodged to the side and a leg flashed, kicking the rifle from James's hands.

"You've got a lot of heart," the man said, standing over him. His deep voice had taken a breathy, gravelly undertone. "I'll give you that."

James said in a hoarse voice, "Enough to pass your test?"

The Oneron smiled grimly. "Afraid not, brother."

James's father's grapple hook clinked softly on the man's belt as he took a step closer. James felt a surge of anger ripple through him, though he had little energy to do much about it. Blood dripped from open wounds on his face and body, his hand leaving a bloody print on the floor. He managed to get to his feet, leaning back against the cold metal wall, and closed his eyes. Rest was very welcomed. The Oneron remained standing in front of him.

A grunt preceded the rush of wind. James dropped down instinctively and his eyes snapped open to see the Maldrinn strike the wall where his head had been. The blade embedded into the wall, and from the Oneron's yanks, it appeared to be stuck there.

James's mind was a maelstrom of pain and exhaustion as he lunged at the Oneron. He unloaded a barrage of punches, high and low, ducking under a swinging arm and throwing out hook after hook. His mind blurred with aggression. A cut tore open on the Oneron's forehead, spraying blood.

Finally letting go of the sword handle, the Oneron swung a heavy backhand that burst with a bright Light. James managed to duck in time, mostly dropping with fatigue, and the Light blast crashed through the wall. A large section broke apart, leaving a hole in the wall several feet wide, and revealed a large open room beyond. It looked to be a giant shaft, reaching several levels down and up several more levels. Warm wind carried the smell of old, rusting metals.

James lunged at the Oneron again, but the man came at him with both hands raised and a fierce glare in his eyes. They slammed full bodied into each other and the force threw them both through the hole in the wall.

Wind rushed over them as they fell through the air for a long moment, James's stomach lurching with the sudden momentum. Giant plates of steel, studded with bolts, lined the walls of the shaft. Doorway lights by walkways along the walls streamed by James's view as they fell.

The Oneron twisted and push himself free. He spun in the air, his hand moving to his grapple hook, and fired it upwards. The hook zipped out. James reached out and smacked

the handle from his hand. It shot upwards as the hook caught, leaving them both to continue falling.

A raised platform near the ground level reached up to them. James grabbed hold of the man's shirt and pulled him close, pressing himself on top of him. The Oneron reached for James's father's hook on his belt, but an instant later they crashed into the platform. James's entire body jolted, his breath leaving him, as the impact slammed him into the Oneron. He slumped to the side, rolling onto his back, trying to catch his breath. His shoulder spasmed with broken bones, and bursts of crippling pain pulsed through him. He was vaguely aware of how far they had fallen. It must have been more than sixty feet.

This was it, he realised as numbness crept over him and his vision darkened. His body was finally shutting down. It took all his remaining energy to turn his head to check the Oneron lying beside him. Blood poured from the man's mouth and nose. His chest was moving with shallow breaths.

James willed himself to get up, but his body did not respond. A leg shifted beside him, then an arm. The Oneron was stirring. *Get up!* James urged himself, gritting his teeth. He tasted blood, mixing with the thickly metallic air. He tensed and tried to move again, but his limbs would not work.

The Oneron lifted himself onto an elbow and brought a hand under him, breathing heavily. He glared at James with murder in his blood-shot eyes.