

Chapter Forty Two: Hard Choices - Part Two

Conveyor belts and machinery covered the vast factory floor. Sam landed on a metal walkway on the second level, which connected to other walkways with staircases that criss-crossed over the factory. Gunfire tore through the air as guards fired from cover at the Oneron soldiers, who swung through the air, blocking with their Light Shields and throwing back blasts of Light as they flew. Only six soldiers had entered the forge, making their way through each floor, while the others remained holding back the guards outside. So far there had been no signs of James or Jaxx.

Soldiers had ushered out several workers in white coats through a side door. Sam made sure that the workers who posed no immediate threat to them were let out, and the soldiers would detain them for arrest and questioning later. That was before more of Jaxx's guards showed up and opened fire on everyone.

Liana dove overhead, sending a double stream of Light Beams with both hands over the machinery and equipment, which erupted in explosions of glass and metal. She landed beside Sam, the large sword on her back clanging on the railing, and ducked beside a low barrier.

"Most of the upper levels are cleared," she said, raising her voice over the gunfire. "We're wasting our time here. Jaxx may be gone already. Maybe with James."

"I'll go lower," Sam said. "Search the ground floor again. There may be lower levels we missed."

Liana cursed, wiping hair from her face. "We don't have enough people to search thoroughly."

"We'll do all we can."

She nodded. "I'll let Aris know that you and I will search the lower levels." Her eyes remained on him, in a moment that seemed to freeze time, before she turned and dove into the air.

Sam watched her fly. He knew the look. She was glad he was there with her; that he was back to his old self. And he was glad to be there too.

Sam spun as someone landed beside him, but held his sword back when he saw it was one of their soldiers.

The young man held up a device. Its screen showed an electronic readout of the area it pointed at, including the rooms beyond. The images showed the block formations of the rooms around them in real time, and the structure of the tower, as the device pointed in different directions. "General, you have to see this."

"What is it?" Sam asked. He saw a blinking green light in a room above as the soldier held the device up.

"Heat signature that matches Higerio Jaxx's patterns. Located in an office on a floor above."

Long windows were on the higher level where the light indicated. Sam searched for Liana but had lost her within the chaos. He turned back to the young soldier.

"Any signs of James?"

The soldier shook his head.

"Find Captain Kallo and inform her I'm going after Jaxx," Sam said. "The priority is to find James Island. All men are to focus on him. We can't keep getting distracted by fighting Jaxx's guards."

The soldier nodded briskly, though looked uncertain.

Sam studied the upper windows, which were over sixty feet up. Heading up there would leave him exposed, but he had no time for a safer route. He shot upwards and pushed off the wall beside him. His Light Shield blocked a few wayward energy blasts, before he fired his grapple hook onto an upper beam and pulled himself up. Streams of hot energy shot upwards as more weapons turned on him. He fired down several Light Shots, mostly as a distraction, and soared upwards. He released the grapple hook and shot it behind him onto a roof girder, then allowed gravity to take over and swing him back with the momentum, feeling exposed in the open air. More gunshots focused on him as his swing brought him to the back wall, where he planted his feet and pushed off with great force. He swung forward in a wide arc, then released the hook as he came up and dove through the air for several feet. He braced himself as he crashed through the window, falling into a roll.

He found himself in a wide, brightly lit room with a raised platform on the far end that led to a large greyed-out window. Sofas and chairs made up one corner of the room, while the rest of the area held desks and cabinets.

Higerio Jaxx stood by a computer terminal on the raised platform. At seeing Sam, he spun back towards the terminal and fired a pistol at it. The monitor and casing exploded and threw out sparks.

Sam drew his sword but kept it low as he approached Jaxx, who pointed the pistol at him. Sam stopped.

"You're too late, General Hawkings," Jaxx said. He held up a square device the size of his palm. "I have several tonnes of explosives being activated under the tower. In seven minutes, the detonator will be primed, and I'll just need to push this button to set it off." He shoved the device into his inside jacket pocket while keeping his pistol trained on Sam. "All

that's left is for me to be on my way. I personally wouldn't want to be within the blast radius when I hit the button."

"I don't suppose we can go back to talking things over?" Sam asked, carefully stepping closer.

"And what would you like to discuss?" Jaxx's voice had grown heavier, thicker, and echoed quietly in Sam's mind. "Do you have anything to say to these people?"

Death and decay surrounded Sam. Bodies littered the room, thrown over desks, twisted in heaps on the ground, limbs torn from bodies. Blood everywhere. Wide eyes, bright white against their dirty faces, looked up at Sam from all over the room. He steadied himself, feeling the urge to vomit. The floor teetered, as though the tower was rocking.

"You have a lot to explain to them." It was Jaxx's voice, but deep and distant, thrumming with a heavy force that bore into Sam's skull.

Sam fell to a knee, trying to fight back the disorientating waves. He recognised some of the faces. Men he had sworn to protect. Soldiers under his command. Townsfolk who had suffered under a tyranny he fought against. The dead souls who were coming back to haunt him. Somehow, he felt as though the entire tower had filled with the bodies of everyone who had died under his command. Hundreds of bodies throughout the tower; like the conveyor belts were producing dead people.

He was vaguely aware that Jaxx had gone. Elevator doors opened by the window along the raised platform, and Jaxx was entering inside.

Sam fought through the chaos in his mind and struggled to his feet. Knowing that the bodies were not really there did not ease his mind. Those people were still dead, even if their corpses were just images.

No! Sam cried. Or he thought he did. The word rang in his mind. He blinked back the tears in his eyes, and his watery vision seemed to clear the hideous images. He was back in the room, alone.

He jogged to the window on weakened legs. Through the frosted glass, he could vaguely see Jaxx exiting the elevator that ran down the outside of the building. Several vehicles were stationed in the open area below. Jaxx ran towards a large transport craft; a bulky, solid build, with dusty black paintwork. Sam recognised it as a similar craft to the ones that had been loaded with weapons, hours earlier.

He looked back over at the console Jaxx had blown. It was beyond use. The only way to stop the bomb from blowing now was to get the kill-switch from Jaxx.

Sam faced the window and stepped back. His mind still ached from the effects of Jaxx's Illusion magic. He mastered himself, controlling his breathing. He threw his arm forward

with fingers spread wide, and channelled several thin streams of Light that flared out and struck the glass. Webs of cracks spread out from their impacts, but the glass mostly held strong. Sam continued to step back, giving himself more room - and time to recover - and threw out another barrage of Light in the centre of the glass. The cracks spread out further. The faint sounds of craft engines coming to life reached him from below.

Sam broke into a run towards the window. He threw his shoulder into the glass as he crashed through it, and flew several feet into the open air, glass shards falling around him. He righted himself in the air and shot his grapple hook to a crane arm directly ahead of him, and swung down. He hit the ground and rolled – a motion he had to be careful doing with an unsheathed sword on his back. The large craft lifted off the ground, throwing up dirt and sand, and shot forward.

Sam sprinted to a nearby ship; a smaller craft with a sleeker design and curved canopy. He entered through the back and jumped into the pilot's chair at the front, firing up the engines and flicking switches. He moved without thinking, hands moving on their own, only knowing that he had to get to Jaxx before the bomb blew. He had less than six minutes now.

He pushed the throttle and the craft jerked into motion, At once he was in the air, leaving the iron forge behind him and entering the open dunes of the surrounding land. Jaxx's large ship was in the distance, leaving a pillar of smoke and sand in its wake.

The flying laws prohibited unauthorised flights, and so they both would have to keep a low altitude so as not to be detected by the anti-air radars. That meant keeping close to the rock formations and low dunes. Not even Jaxx would risk being caught on Lawmen's radars during his getaway.

Sam flicked on his sat-com and called Liana.

When she answered, he quickly said, "The tower is rigged to blow. You have five minutes to evacuate before the bomb is primed. Jaxx has made a run for it. I've taken after him in a ship."

Liana cursed under her breath. "Where are you?" Gunfire and explosive blasts rang out in the background.

"We're heading east, along the Red Rock Highway."

"Can we stop the bomb?"

"Jaxx blew the console that activated it. I have to get to him before he hits the switch once it's primed. The bastard gave himself enough time to clear the blast radius. Means it'll be a big one." Sam swerved around a jutting rock and righted his ship. "But if I don't get to him in time, Liana, you make sure you clear the building. Find James and get him and everyone else out of there."

"We still have workers to evacuate," she said. "And we'll need to clear the surrounding streets."

Sam steered the craft around a large rock outcropping and turned onto a rising hill. The craft rocked and jolted as he pushed it harder.

"Get that detonator, Sam," Liana said. "We'll do what we can here. I promise, we'll find James."

Sam grit his teeth. He felt so helpless now, away from the forge. "Good luck." He cut the transmission.

He slammed a hand on the dashboard and cursed himself. He was meant to get James out. Now he was going farther away. He knew though, that the biggest priority was stopping the bomb from blowing. He just hoped the others would find James in time; and hoped he hadn't just gotten another person under his protection killed.