

Chapter Thirty Eight - Offense and Defense - Part Two

Sam dropped to the ground and made a run towards the nearest of the transport ships. Engines had fired up from one of them; a deep rumbling sound that shook the ground. He didn't have long before the first ship took off.

A guard in silver and blue Sacre armour charged directly towards Sam. He had the bulbous head, long pointed chin, and pink spotted skin of an Udron, the highly disciplined aquatic race. The Udron shouted a war cry, his short chin tentacles shaking with anger, and raised his sword.

Sam blocked and parried a series of powerful attacks, flipped away from a heavy strike that cracked the ground, and then jumped back to give himself more ground. The Udron was good. Sam dove straight through the air and twisted his body as he came to him, swiping once and then spinning with a second attack that caught the Udron across his stomach. The Udron staggered back with a hand to his torso and fell to a knee.

Across the battlefield, James blocked shots with his Light Shield and cut down a guard, as he tried to make his way to the nearest of the transport ships, whose engines had grown to a loud roar. Despite their circumstances, Sam felt a welling of pride at seeing a glimpse of the man he once knew, as if he were watching a memory.

"I'm going for the ship," James shouted out to Sam.

"Right with you," Sam called back. The Udron was on his feet again. Sam needed to deal with him quickly.

He faced the enemy and sheathed his sword. He had an old move in mind. The Udron charged at him.

Sam weaved in close, grabbed hold of the man and jumped up, sending them straight up into the air. He held on as they soared higher. The Udron struggled against the hold but the suddenness of being in the open air clearly surprised him, his chin tentacles fluttering. At the apex of the jump, around forty feet, Sam pressed his feet against the man's torso and kicked out with great force. The Udron shot through the air, flailing until he crashed into the wall of the main tower. Sam allowed himself to drop and deftly landed.

The Udron collapsed onto a walkway below him and lay there without moving. Sam scanned the battlefield and quickly saw a clear path to the ships. There looked to be only a few more soldiers on the field. Evan battled Jaxx's Firion bodyguard, with two other guards charging at him. Jaxx was still nowhere in sight, but was likely on one of the ships.

As Sam headed for the ships, he couldn't deny the thrill coursing through him. He almost felt like his old self again. More so than he had felt in a long time. Having spent so long being afraid of exposing himself as an Oneron to their enemies - afraid to be himself again -

he realised that none of that mattered now. He had no more cause for restraint. A part of him wished he had his grapple hook in the fight.

Guards shot down at him from the main tower. Sam charged Light into his palm – a sensation he had not felt in a long time – and unleashed the power on them. A ball of glowing white light struck the guards and threw them back, some falling over the railing.

A heavysset guard came at him but Sam landed a spinning kick as he ran, knocking the man down. Something small hit the ground near him, and in a moment of panic, he saw it was a grenade. He launched himself into the air as a powerful explosion erupted behind him, throwing him further into the air with a hot blast. He braced himself and slammed into the side of the tunnel between the towers, then fell back to the ground.

He collected himself, shaking the dizziness from his head, and got unsteadily to his feet. A guard nearby fired a stream of electric bolts at him, but he ducked and weaved around them as he came closer to the rifleman. Sweat poured down Sam's face, along with blood from a few stinging scrapes. He brought his Light Shield up to block a final shot before he sliced his sword across the man's shins, and continued running for the ships. His muscles burned and fatigue began to pound in his head, but he pushed himself on.

Once they had destroyed the ships, they could get away from the battle with or without Jaxx.

Sam leapt into the air and brought the flat of his sword down to crack against the back of a guard firing at James.

A heavy whine filled the air as the first transport ship lifted off the ground, throwing out dirt and dust in heavy clouds. The cockpit windows were too high and washed out by the sunlight to see who was piloting them.

"Hold back, James!" Sam called out.

He reached down and pulled an explosive device from the belt of the guard by his feet. He charged ahead as James skidded to a halt, and threw the grenade. It hit the front of the ship and exploded with a brilliant flash. The large ship jolted in the air, flames lapping over it, and it lurched back to the ground. Another explosion came from within the ship as it crashed down in a burning heap, a pillar of smoke billowing from it.

Before Sam could celebrate the small victory, a powerful force slammed into his side. He hit the ground hard and slid several feet through the dirt. His head spun and his bruised side burned.

A dark figure landed before him. Sam lifted his head to see a man in a close-fitting black combat suit, lightly armoured with thin chest and shoulder coverings. The man withdrew the large sword across his back, and Sam's eyes widened at seeing the Maldrinn. But he

didn't need to recognise the large sword with the hilt-knife to know that this man was an Oneron. Liana had mentioned one was working with Jaxx, and the way he moved said it all.

"You from the Avancheon?" Sam asked as he rose to his feet, grimacing at the pain in his side. "Dellaron? Daeyan Army?" He was hoping that mentioning Oneron armies would get a response from the man. If he was under some kind of mind control then maybe he could shake the real man free.

The Oneron said nothing. He flourished his sword and then swung out. Sam countered and hit back, parrying and dodging a quick combination, but his blocks pushed him back each time. It had been a long time since he'd faced a Maldrinn in real combat. He weaved around a strike and then went in for an attack, but the Oneron's elbow shot out and caught Sam across the eye. Sam staggered, blinking back white flashes, and wiped blood from his brow.

The Oneron was on him again. Under his short beard, his mouth was a tight line of determination.

Sam blocked and faltered, then went in for his own attack. The Oneron's spinning dodge brought him in close and Sam just managed to block his swinging sword before jumping back.

Sam steadied his breath, realising just how rusty he had become. This was no simple Oneron soldier.

"Who are you?" Sam asked, trying again.

The Oneron's hard expression remained. He stepped closer, readying his sword. He looked to have no intention of talking.

Sam spared a look at Evan to see the Voarn surrounded by several guards. Ahead, James was charging into a group of guards by the second transport ship. They wouldn't last much longer like this, Sam knew. They needed to stick close together. It had been a miracle they'd survived this long against so many guards.

The enemy Oneron flipped up and whirled in the air, his sword spinning with him. Sam also spun in the air, following a backhand with a spinning kick that hit air before he landed and ducked away from a vertical strike. When Sam dodged around the next attack, he burned his left hand and threw a flaming punch, but the man bent over backwards to dodge and flipped back, kicking Sam in the jaw.

Sam was lifted off his feet and hit the ground. His vision blacked for a second, his throat seizing with vomit and blood. When he opened his eyes, blood pouring from his brow blurred his view. He forced himself to get up as the enemy Oneron came to him.

The mechanical staff twirled through the air as it came to Evan, just missing him as he ducked. It curved through the air and snapped back into the wolf-man's gloved hand. There must be a magnetic influence between the glove and staff, he had determined, and for a time now had been aiming to damage the glove.

This foe, Vogri, was proving himself to be a very formidable enemy. Evan had been allowing him to distract him from the wider battle for too long. He charged forward, determined to be done with him.

As Evan met him, he ducked under the swinging staff and it came back in time to block his sword strikes. Evan didn't even see the staff come around and crack him against the head. He staggered sideways, suddenly disorientated, and kept moving back to give himself space.

Shots fired out from above and pounded the ground near him. Evan turned, his head spinning with fatigue, and found the guards up on a nearby walkway. He cried out as he channelled his sorcery, risking the cost of tiring himself further in order to get rid of them. A gust of wind flew from his outstretched palm and barrelled into the guards on the walkway. And nothing happened. They remained where they were as if his sorcery had no effect on them.

Evan had no time to worry on that as Vogri rushed towards him with the staff raised. Blocking and weaving around attacks, Evan grew greatly disturbed with the state of his sorcery. He had to wonder if his sorcery still had any effect, and would have to try again. Even if it would exhaust him, he knew he had to add offensive sorcery to this fight. If there was one advantage that he, Sam and James had over their enemies, it was the use of sorcery; something that he had not seen from any of the guards yet.

The wolf-man back flipped away from a swipe and landed several paces away. More gunfire tore through the air, but Evan had to remain focused on his enemy.

The staff tip aimed towards him and suddenly extended outwards. For a brief second all Evan saw was the circular front-on shape of the staff before it struck him in the head with a white flash. Blood dripped down his temple as he fought to clear his shaken mind.

The wolf-man readied the staff for the same attack, but this time Evan was ready for him. The staff tip shot out towards him again. Evan dodged to the side, dropped his sword, and caught the staff with both hands. He jerked forward, his feet lifting off the ground as the staff retracted and pulled him to its source. Evan channelled a storm of sorcery within him, sending it into his hands and vibrating through the staff.

He met Vogri as the staff snapped into place and used the momentum to reinforce his sorcerous push, igniting a pulse of wind that burst between them. A fierce energy reverberated through Evan, shaking his bones, in the moment of impact. He flipped backwards and managed to land on his feet, looking up to see his enemy soaring upwards

amidst the dissipating wind. His flailing body crashed through a circular window on the third level of the iron forge and disappeared from sight.

Evan's shoulders sagged, sweat dripping from him. The mechanical staff remained nearby on the ground. A dull sensation pulsed inside him. The demon had extended itself in his sorcerous push, and Evan felt like it had a taste for power now. It wanted to wield more sorcery.

An explosion rang out across the field, rising in a plume of smoke. Evan rushed back to retrieve his sword, his legs burning with exhaustion. As he reached for the sword, electric bolts struck the ground and pushed him back. He stumbled and saw two guards rushing to him with rifles drawn. Evan wanted more than ever to throw sorcery at them but he could feel his strength depleting. He couldn't trust opening himself to a sorcery that the demon could seize in his weakened state.

He ducked and then scrambled to the side as more blasts aimed for him. A long dive and a skid through the dirt brought him to his sword, which he swung up in time to block several electric shots. Two more guards made their way to him with swords drawn. Another barrage of shots hit his intercepting sword, but Evan screamed in pain as a bolt ripped into his thigh. Searing heat burst over his leg, singeing a hole in his trousers and dropping him to the ground.

A throbbing sensation pounded inside him, causing him to fight for breath. The demon was trying to break out, stronger than ever.

The first sword-guard came to him. Evan managed to block the downward strike and force himself to scramble back, his injured leg pulsing with crippling pain. Now he was surrounded by the sword-guards. He saw, with sweat blurring vision, that the two riflemen had been drawn away, and now charged towards James, who was close to the remaining transport ship.

Swords swung at him and he blocked their attacks, though his movements were slow and weak, his sword barely still in his hand. He fell onto his back, gasping for breath. The pounding sensation grew stronger, pulsing so hard it shook his body, as though he were being punched from within.

He rolled away as a sword hit the ground near his chest, and pushed himself up to find another blade swinging at him. A sharp spasm struck him as the sword tip sliced across his torso, drawing a line of blood and staining his tunic.

Evan fell and caught himself with a hand on the hot earth. His other hand pressed against the line of blood on his stomach. His journey was at an end. He knew it. After everything he had fought for, everything he wanted to achieve, he would be stopped here on this planet far from home. He would never get the chance to rule his kingdom.

His entire body buzzed with an electrifying energy, mixed with a dull pain. He could almost hear the demon's shouts inside him, though did not understand the words. Boots shifted as the guards came to him with grunts that signalled an impending attack.

His hand curled over his sword hilt on the ground and squeezed hard. The dark blade was emitting a faint light that was hard to see, which soon grew to a heavy glow that roiled with an inky, purple light.

Evan's scream ripped from him and extended outwards like a force of its own. The edge of a swinging sword dug into his back, and the impact unleashed an explosion of sorcery.

Sam coughed and heaved, his body aching all over as he fell to the ground. His dull mind became aware of Evan calling out. He managed to turn his head to see several guards surrounding Evan, who was on his knees. The enemy Oneron leapt up and soared into the air. He came down towards Sam with his sword drawn.

Evan's screamed filled the battlefield. A blue energy grew from within the group of guards and exploded out in a powerful, tumultuous sphere. Bodies flew back; dark shapes against the brilliant blue-white wind. The force hit the falling Oneron and shot him sideways through the air before he reached Sam. He crumbled to the ground, rolling and settling in a heap, his sword clanging on the hot earth.

Sam wiped blood from his eye and saw Evan alone on the field, fallen to his knees and sweating profusely. Bodies surrounded him. The Voarn turned his head and spat blood. His tunic stuck to him with patches of blood. Sam got to his feet and forced himself to keep moving. They had one transport ship left, and Jaxx had to be on it.

The enemy Oneron lay on the ground in a daze. Hopefully that gave them enough time away from him. Sam ran towards the tower, fighting through exhaustion and pain.

Shots rang out, exploding by his feet. Another barrage of shots came from the side. Sam spun around and instinctively brought his sword up to intercept, but hot pain exploded in his side, taking his breath. The sounds of battle suddenly muted. He stumbled sideways, swaying drunkenly, and then dropped to his knees. He looked down to see a hole in his side, below his ribs, quickly seeping with blood and staining his shirt.

Through Sam's dulled senses, he made out roaring engines. He looked up to see the second transport ship preparing to take off. He forced a knee under him, panting heavily, and tried to get to his feet, using everything he had left to move.

James had finished with his intercepting guards and was now blocking shots with his Light Shield as he approached the large ship. Sam pushed himself into a shaky run towards James.

James's muscles burned and every part of him hurt, but somehow, he was still going. Somehow, he even felt stronger than ever, spurred on with adrenaline and the sheer luck of still being alive.

Beside the flaming wreck of the first ship, the second transport rumbled as it began lifting off the ground in a cloud of dust. Sam reached James, a hand on his side that was covered in blood.

"Sam," James said in alarm, coming to a stop.

Sam shook his head and gestured. "The ship," he growled.

James looked to the rising ship and back at Sam. If he waited any longer, they would lose their chance to stop it. When he saw the large rifle beside a fallen guard, everything fell into place. James holstered his sword on his back as he jogged ahead and scooped up the heavy silver rifle. It was one of the bulkier models that Jaxx's men had, with a huge barrel that needed two hands to hold.

The gun would either be one of Jaxx's free-arm models, or something from Sacre. Either way, James had a feeling he could fire it. He came to the ship, now ten feet off the ground and rising, and fired. A hot beam of blue energy streamed from the rifle and tore into the hull of the ship, leaving scorch marks in its wake. The force of the energy jolted up James's arms.

Over the whining ship engines and the rolling stream of plasma, James became aware of movement to the side. Four more guards were charged towards them, and Sam was coming to intercept. Somehow, Sam had his sword drawn, despite the wound in his side and the pained look on his face.

James focused back on the ship, which was now high up over them. It began to rotate as it aimed itself away from the iron forge. James fired another stream of energy, tearing a line through its underside. The ship wavered in the air but continued its ascent, its engines making shuddering sounds. Crying out with frustration, James leapt into the air and came up in front of the cockpit. He opened fire and the cockpit glass exploded as the hot beam ripped into it. The dark shapes of the two pilots were consumed within the fiery chaos. Sparks and flames exploded outwards as James began falling back down. He shuddered as he landed, thinking of the pilots he had burned, and his throat tightened in the dark moment.

The whining engines grew deafening as the large ship came spiralling towards him. James turned and jumped away as the ship crashed down and exploded. He hit the ground with debris and flames falling around him, and managed to hold on to the rifle as he rolled back to his feet, his head spinning with fatigue.

Evan was heading across the field towards them, hobbling with a leg covered in blood. He grimaced with exhaustion and pain; his tunic also stained with blood. The sight of Evan so bloodied caused James's heart to jump. Doors burst open and more guards streamed out from one of the smaller towers and headed to intercept Evan.

Sam now faced the four guards with swords and staffs. He swung his sword out wide to keep the guards back. Panic seized James at seeing how exhausted and pained Sam looked as he stumbled, almost collapsing.

James tightened his hold of the rifle and leapt into the air towards Sam.

Sam's legs buckled as he dodged a staff swing, and he swung his sword out to keep another guard back. Searing pain was coursing through his entire body, but all he could do was keep fighting.

A pulsing beam of blue energy hit the ground, burning where it went, before it hit a guard and threw him back. Sam turned and saw James coming down towards them, firing again and hitting more guards.

Sam lunged at the remaining guard, blocking a staff and then bringing his sword down on the man's shoulder, cracking the armour by his neck. The guard hit the ground as Sam stumbled and also fell.

James came and brought a hand under Sam to help him stand. Blood and spit flew from Sam as he gasped and tensed against the pain in his side. Both his hands were covered in blood.

"Let's get out of here," James said. He aimed the rifle at more guards approaching. "Can you run?"

A blast of white light suddenly slammed into James, throwing him back and sending the rifle spiralling away.

Sam's chest tightened when he saw the enemy Oneron approaching them, stepping past fallen bodies and smoking debris. His Maldrinn shone beside him in the overbearing sun. Behind him, Evan became surrounded by a group of guards and was lost from view.

A groan of despair left Sam. He cursed himself for putting them in this situation. He should never have gone without Liana's help. And now her men had been ambushed by even more of Jaxx's guards.

James lay dazed several feet away. Sam rose up to go to him but his legs buckled and he fell back down. Blood dripped from his brow onto the hot earth. Heavy footfalls and shifting armour told him more guards were coming. The sounds of battle had diminished considerably now. Or maybe his hearing was going.

The Oneron came to Sam, glaring down at him.

A bolt shot through the air and struck the Oneron in the back, shoving him to the ground with bright sparks of paralysing electricity that caused him to convulse. Someone landed in the group attacking Evan and began pushing them back with a spinning sword.

Sam saw, with great relief that sagged his shoulders, that it was a young man in a blue uniform. An Oneron soldier. One of Liana's. Other figures dropped down with swords drawn and Light Shields flashing. The Oneron soldiers charged into the field and took on the remaining guards, firing Light magic and jumping through the air.

Sam never thought he'd be so happy to see other Oneron again.

James stirred on the ground, groaning. When Sam turned to him, he saw someone rushing towards them, and he perked up with astonishment when he recognised Castan.

The Canarrian's eyes were wide with determination and fear as he came to Sam, pulling him up. "I got you," Castan said.

"Go, to James," Sam said, supporting himself on his sword.

Castan left him and went over, but then saw two guards in Sacre armour charging towards him and staggered back with a frightened look.

Sam pushed himself to his feet and stumbled closer. He brought his sword up, but sharp pain in his side held him back. He faltered but kept going as the two guards reached him. He managed to block a swinging staff but a second staff cracked against his head, dropping him.

Around the field, Oneron soldiers continued to fight back the remaining guards. One soldier landed before them and took on the two guards. Sam's vision had started to blur and he squeezed his eyes to shake the sweat and blood from them.

Castan was at his side again and helped him to stand. Sam fought against the urge to vomit.

"James," Sam said weakly.

He looked back and saw there were two guards dragging James away. Sam shoved Castan away and staggered towards James, but a hand pulled him back.

"Sam, no, you're done," Castan shouted. "Let the soldiers get him. Where's Evan?"

"No," Sam cried out, his voice strained.

Castan curled an arm around him and pulled him away from the tower.

More guards had appeared near the two taking James, and they opened fire at the attacking Oneron soldiers. Sam called out again but James became lost from view, covered by guards.

Sam dropped his head and he let Castan move him away. The sounds of battle faded, Sam's mind wavering. Blood poured down his face, falling into his eyes and his mouth, but he didn't care.

They had lost James.