

## Chapter Four: Leap of Faith - Part One

James stared, uncomprehending, as Sam stepped to the edge of the platform, towards the giant dragon.

"Sam, Sam!" James whispered loudly, waving him back.

Keeping his gaze ahead, Sam raised a palm to James, nodding that it was okay.

A low rumble came from the mouth of the mountain-dragon. It remained still, watching them. The sheer size of it astonished James.

"Look," Sam said, awe softening his voice.

Look at what? James thought. Do you think I'm not looking at the giant dragon in front of us?

*James took an apprehensive step closer. Through the heavy mist in the air, he thought he saw shadows move over the creature. No, through the creature. He focused on the breathing mountain, and realised he could see the faint form of the rocky terrain behind it. Stepping back for a wider view, he grasped that they were seeing some form of a... ghost? Whatever this thing was in front of them, it wasn't actually there. James was reminded of a hologram projection, although that couldn't be what they were seeing.*

Sam gave a shaky, reassuring nod. The gesture did not ease James. Even if what they were seeing wasn't real, it didn't necessarily mean it couldn't hurt them.

The dragon's emerald eyes seemed to be... looking at James. He couldn't be sure, and it was hard to tell given its immense size and how close he was, but it felt like it was looking directly at him. Like it had come up to see him. It was a disturbing thought, and he tried to shake it, feeling a cold shiver run through him.

"What do you think it is?" James asked, keeping his eyes locked on the dragon.

Before there could be any response – or perhaps as a response - the dragon lifted its head and opened its enormous mouth, releasing a deafening roar that shook the entire cave. James covered his ears and fought against the fierce, suffocating power rushing over them. It felt as though a giant furnace had opened nearby. Chips of rock fell from above, along with a heavy dust that added to the red mist in the air.

Suddenly the wall behind them fell away, as did the rest of the cavern. Rock walls folded back and revealed a world beyond; a fiery landscape of mountainous rock and geysers of flames. Their ledge had become the flat top of a mountain range that looked over the rumbling land. Jagged black mountains smothered the horizon, heavy grey clouds streaming across the tormented sky.

James stepped back as the dragon straightened its body and began unfolding its colossal wings. He caught himself before he reached the edge of the ground, unsure if they were still in the cave or not, and not wanting to risk stepping out into the empty air.

The ghostly dragon rose into the sky, revealing the extent of its enormous body. Its scaled and spiked wings extended to an incredibly long span that seemed to cover the horizon. Its lithe body glided through the air like a slithering snake. It was impossibly large, and looked as though it would have flattened half of Tyken Town if it landed in the city.

Fires spewed from mounds over the tortured landscape. James was reminded of the hellish vision that came to him after he had killed the beggar. But this land felt different. Though they could hear the rumbling earth and the heavy wind, the air hadn't changed. He couldn't feel the heat or smell burning or rotten flesh, like he had in that other fiery world. And the biggest difference of all was that there were no hooded figure watching him, entering his mind.

Darkness fell over the world, bringing with it a heavy silence. For a moment James saw nothing, not even himself. A rumbling followed, cracking rocks coming from beyond the darkness. The dim rock walls and the chasm materialised, like a light slowly illuminating the gloomy area.

Sam looked shaken and disorientated. James rubbed his eyes, feeling a great weight lift off him. It felt like coming out of a dream and adjusting back to the world. Even though the dragon was gone, and they were back where they had been, he couldn't shake the feeling that the dragon was somehow still watching him, from wherever it was.

The rumbling continued to spread around the cave, gaining strength. Dark fissures ran down the walls, splintering and cracking the enormous cavern apart. Boulders fell from the crumbling ceiling, some falling into the chasm, some landing on their ledge in showers of debris and dust.

Their ledge shifted and rocked, causing them both to fight for balance and scramble to the wall for safety.

"That's enough of this," Sam called out. "Time to go. Now."

He gestured towards the tunnel they had marked as their destination, and broke into an unsteady run. James's heart raced as he followed Sam down the rocky pathway, jumping down the stepped rock and over the larger cracks between the ledges.

"Sam, what the hell is happening?" James called out as they ran.

"I think we disturbed something. But can't say what."

They came to a narrow ledge that stretched along the wall and had to carefully side step across it, pressing their backs against the trembling wall. Sweat dripped from James as he shimmed across, trying not to let the empty darkness below affect his focus.

A wide space opened up ahead, given them more room race towards the bridge. The cavern trembled all around them. A giant boulder came down and crashed in front of them, taking with it part of the ground. Sam skidded to a halt, holding James back from the exploding rubble and clouds of dust. Chunks of breaking rocks rolled into darkness of the chasm.

"We keep going for the bridge," Sam called out, coughing and pointing to the rock bridge, visible through the dissipating dust.

James estimated the bridge stretched a hundred and fifty feet across. The yellow light coming from the opening on the other side had grown and become more orange now. He quickly scanned the area but saw no other route for them to take.

They rounded the boulder debris and raced to the bridge. A deep growl was reverberating through the cave, almost like an echo that had diminished, but never fully faded, and had now begun building again. It felt like the dragon was still with them, within the walls. All around. James forced himself not to think about that. He just had to keep running, to get out of the cave before they were crushed inside it.

They finally reached the curved bridge. It looked around ten feet wide and narrowed in the middle, at the top of its low arc. James was close beside Sam as they ran across, the ground continuing to tremble. A hot wind reached up from the darkness below.

Collapsing rocks fell around them. They reached the highest point of the curving bridge, which James guessed would've been half-way. A loud crack came from the wall on their right and a large section of rock shifted. The slab of rock fell away from the wall and came towards them in a horrifying moment that seemed to go in slow motion. It crashed down several feet away in a loud explosion, taking with it the last section of the bridge.

James fell back in a cloud of dust as the bridge shuddered, huge chunks breaking away with deafening cracks.

Sam helped him up and they neared the edge of the bridge, James moving on weakened legs. A twenty-foot gap was now between them and the far side of the cavern. A protruding ledge on the other side, where the bridge had connected to, lead the way to the cave opening. James looked around frantically, finding only empty air all around them and a howling darkness below.

"James," Sam said, turning to him. "We have to jump across."

"Are you kidding?" James shouted. "Sam, there's no way—"

"Listen to me," Sam said sternly. "You can get across. Jumping is as simple as walking for an Oneron." Boulders fell and smashed onto the bridge, chipping into the shaking rock. "Trust in yourself. Just follow me."

"Sam, I can't," James said in a weak voice. He hated himself for admitting that, and he turned away from Sam's stern look.

"Then you'll die here," Sam said.

The bluntness of Sam's words froze James.

Sam turned, adjusting the sword on his hip, and ran to the edge of the bridge. His leap sent him rocketing into the air, soaring to the other end, easily clearing the gap. Sam landed and looked back, watching James with eyes wide with urgency.

James remained where he was, unsure of what to do.

"Let's go, James!" Sam called.

James tried to steady his breath and then took several steps back. Oneron were renowned for their great jumping ability, he'd been told. And Sam had certainly proved that. James just hoped he was able to do it himself. *Okay, okay. You can do this. Just run and jump. Simple. Come on, James. Run. And jump.*

He gathered his confidence and started forward. The bridge jolted with a deep reverberation, almost knocking him off his feet. He choked on the heavy dust in the air and wiped his stinging eyes.

The bridge continued to rock unsteadily. James looked back and saw it had begun to break apart, coming away from the other side.

Sam moved with agitation and called back. "No doubts! No hesitation. Come on, soldier. You have to jump, now!"

James forced himself to focus. Once he was running, he could not hesitate. Once he was in the air... it would be up to fate.

He sprinted forward with clenched fists.