

Chapter Thirty - Part One: Escape Plan

"Is there another way out?" James asked, attaching his sword to his belt.

"Ahmm," Castan huffed. His head darted back and forth, clearly agitated. "Yes. To the side, there is a delivery entrance, I think. Uh, over this way, maybe."

Castan took them around the bar area, past several loud machines and towards a narrow corridor in the corner. James looked back again and saw several more Red Guards in the crowd, their visored helmets all facing his direction.

Castan almost collided with a few lone workers before turning a corner of the carpeted corridor. They came to an intersection of a metal passageway. The pipe-lined passage stretched down either side of them. The casino sounds had faded, the area humming quietly with generators somewhere nearby.

"They saw us, I think," James said, giving Sam an uneasy look.

"There," Castan said, pointing to their left. "This way, should be."

They ran to the end of the passageway and found a metal door on one side.

"I don't think this is what I was thinking of," Castan said, breathing heavily and looking around. "But, it's a door," he added, trying to sound hopeful.

Sam pushed the door open and hot sunlight streamed over them. James blinked back the bright light and followed them outside. They were in a narrow alley, with shrubs and thin trees spread along the chain fencing on one side, and the casino building on the other.

"Which way?" Castan asked.

On their left, two Red Guards came around the corner, their boots thudding and armour shifting. They reached for the rifles hung by their sides.

"This way," Sam said, breaking into a run away from the guards.

After several paces they came to a torn gap in the chain fence. Sam pointed them towards it and they ducked through to a grassy slope beyond. James spared a look back and caught sight of the pursuing Red Guards; two more had joined them. They all, thankfully, seemed reluctant to fire at them out in the open, with people around. At least, James hoped he was right about that.

They reached the top of a low wall and jumped down to the road. The wall ran along one side of the street, with a row of shops opposite. Some people stopped to watch them and James heard questions being asked about where they'd come from and why they were running.

Another group of Red Guards ran towards them, weaving through vehicles passing along the street. James had never seen so many Red Guards together before. The highest order of guards were actively pursuing them, all because he had sneaked into a warehouse with Sam and Evan. Whoever owned the place in Tyken Town must have some serious connections.

"Go on ahead," Castan called back. He caught James by surprise when he turned towards the approaching guards. "I'll draw these ones away. Don't worry, I know these streets. I'll meet you at the docking station."

He broke into a run before they could say anything. He headed towards the guards for a moment before ducking into a side alley. Three of the guards followed him, leaving only two that ran down the street towards James and Sam. And there were still the other four from the casino, coming from the grassy slope.

"Come on," Sam said.

They rounded a corner to another street, where Sam pushed them both into a narrow alley. Rows of metal railings ran up the length of the walls either side of them, by windows with colourful frames. Clothes and other items were slung over some railings, and thin cables were strung across the narrow gap between the buildings.

"Follow me, James," Sam said as they jogged around bin bags and piled up boxes. "Just do as I do."

"I thought I was following you," James said.

"Keep doing it," Sam said, slowing now and looking up. He planted his feet and shot upwards. Pushing off a balcony railing, he pressed himself against the opposite wall and pushed off again, reaching the roof above.

James turned and his heart jolted when he saw Red Guards entering the alleyway.

Okay, just go for it, *he told himself.*

He looked up at the narrow piece of sky over the alleyway, and jumped. He grabbed onto a balcony railing and felt it creak and whine under his weight, before he jumped towards the opposite wall. Hitting the brick wall between two railings, James planted his feet and pushed off again, grabbing onto a balcony on the other side. His head spun with the momentum, adrenaline coursing through him. He jumped up again and grabbed the edge of the opposite roof, and hung there for a moment, steadying his breath. His arms were shaking when he pulled himself up, only glancing down briefly to see the height he had just travelled - around six floors. The Red Guards were down below, looking up at him.

Sam had reached the opposite end of the roof and was looking down, searching the streets. He turned as James approached. "Nice going, Isles. See, jumping isn't so hard?"

"No, you're right," James said, catching his breath. He just had to stop over-thinking things, he knew.

They looked over the roofs around them. Some buildings reached twice as high as theirs, though most were around the same height. Luckily most were flat-roofed or only had one slanted side. James could already picture himself jumping from one rooftop to the next. Except he didn't know which way to go.

"Okay," Sam said. "I think I can get us to the docking station. Just have to keep high. Fortunately, Red Guards can't move like Oneron."

James shuddered at the thought. He couldn't imagine facing up against someone who could move and fight like Sam did.

"Hop along with me," Sam said. He jumped and crossed over the road below, landing easily onto the next roof.

"Hop along," James muttered to himself, shaking his head as he stepped back. Preparing himself, he darted forward and jumped off, soaring over the road. He stumbled on his landing but steadied himself, and couldn't help the small smile that crept on his lips. Jumping across buildings - feeling the wind on his face as he was disconnected from all physical objects - was strangely exhilarating. The thrill spurred him on.

They crossed over several more buildings, some just narrow gaps, others a great distance that gave James moments of terror. He kept up with Sam as best he could, but each large jump made him think that this would be the one he couldn't make. He realised, however, that his legs no longer buckled or hesitated when he reached a building edge. If anything, the longer they went on, the more energy he felt he had.

On one roof, they startled a group of birds that took off in a shower of feathers. Two people on a balcony pointed at them. James allowed his arms and legs to flare out on the next jump, embracing the freedom and serenity of being in the air. It was a strange thought, considering the circumstance, but the threat of the pursuing guards was almost in the back of his mind.

Overhead, a ship crossed the sky, its engines low in the wind, but there was little other movement at this level of the town. They must have been nearing the outer districts.

As they landed on a gravelly roof, Sam stopped and looked around. He rested his hands on his hips, catching his breath.

"Direction?" James asked, wiping sweat from his brow.

Sam shook his head. "I think we're going the right way, but I don't know this town so well. Usually I can find my way through building tops."

"There," James said, pointing between two buildings. He saw a tall peaked structure reaching over the roofs much farther away. It looked to be near the edge of the town. "Is that the iron forge?"

"That's right. Which is on the eastern corner of town. And we came in from the south. Which means... that direction." Sam pointed to their right, towards a few tall buildings. The docking bay must be beyond those buildings there. I'll know it when we see it."

Bursts of gunfire struck by their feet, exploding in a shower of debris. James fell to the side and scrambled away. He searched through the rising dust for the source of the gunfire.

"Come on," Sam said, crouching close. "No more time to talk." He sprinted to the other side of the building.

James followed him as more gunfire streamed by them in bursts of hot light. He ducked as he ran, as if that would help him, and then saw the shooters. Two soldiers were on a nearby roof. They wore simple armour and dark clothing; definitely not Red Guards.

Sam ducked behind a jutting wall near the end of the roof, keeping the guards on the other side. James crouched beside him, catching his breath.

"Down here," Sam said. "We'll go one level down and make our way along there." He had a hand in his satchel and he pulled it out to reveal the pistol he had taken from the outpost. It was front-heavy with a long, thick barrel, and had a silver-grey sheen, with a short, stubby handle. "Just stay close."

James swallowed. He couldn't imagine what would happen to them if they shot at, or even killed, a Red Guard and got caught. He wondered who these other guards were that was shooting at them, and what the consequences would be if Sam killed them.

The next building consisted of a peaked roof with a wide, flat section below. The street was several levels below that. Sam stepped to the edge, coming away from the wall. The rifles fired at him, striking the ground and the wall by his head. He ducked back behind the wall and, waiting a moment, leapt forward. He soared through the air as he turned and shot back at the guards. Then he fell beyond sight to the lower roof.

James stayed there, hearing more of Sam's gun shots below. He could have followed Sam down - he should have - but instead he turned and ran back along the roof. His mind raced as he jogged, keeping low beside the wall. Just following Sam wouldn't help them. Two separate targets were harder to hit and follow than two together.

James had a good idea of where he needed to go, and he couldn't keep relying on Sam to help get him there.

The wall ended several feet from the roof edge and James ran out into the open. Gunfire popped by his feet, causing him to stumble and trip over himself. He fell towards the roof

edge and rolled off, spinning and grabbing onto the edge, his feet dangling. He hung there a moment. A street was directly below him, with people that looked blurry and indistinct, and the open air was behind him. James couldn't pull himself up and expose himself to the rifles, so he planted his feet against the building and pushed off.

He immediately regretted the decision, feeling the fall was far too great. As the next roof reached up to him he prepared himself, the thrill of flying through the air no longer a comfort. It was a much different experience falling downwards.

He slammed down, pain exploding in his legs, and rolled into a splayed heap. He caught his breath, surprised to be alive, and was even more surprised when he discovered his legs still worked. Aside from a few scrapes from the gravelly roof, his body seemed relatively fine.

Clinking armour carried on the wind from somewhere nearby, sounding far too close. James pushed himself to his feet, sweat falling from him, and urged himself to keep moving.

A tall metal tower was just ahead of him on the roof. It was solid concrete for the most part, with a narrow section of criss-crossing beams near the top. He surveyed the tower, judging it to be around a hundred feet high. A part of him wished he hadn't left Sam now, feeling alone and exposed.

Dark figures appeared on a building top to his side. More of the other guards in simple armours he didn't recognise. James broke into a run towards the tower. Gunshots burst all around him, deafening sounds echoing in the still air. He reached a door on the tower and shouldered his way through. The door broke from its hinges and James fell against the inner wall. He look down the corridor he found himself in, rubbing his shoulder. At least he would be safe from the rifles in the tower.

He kept moving, coming to a metal stairwell at the end of the corridor. The cream walls were narrow and felt too restrictive. He suddenly missed being out in the open, where he could manoeuvre better.

Where would Sam have gone? Something told him that Sam would be high up. So James had to get higher.