

Chapter Four: Leap of Faith - Part Two

Reaching the edge, he bent and pushed off with everything he had. The rush of hot wind blew over him as he ascended through the air. Higher and farther he went. Stretching his arms out wide, he felt a strange sense of calm in the air. The impending fall towards the darkness below soon brought him back.

He reached out and his feet landed on the edge of the ground. The momentum threw him forward and he pressed his hands against the wall as he caught himself.

The remaining bridge broke apart with deep, booming cracks and fell into the abyss below.

Sam had a hand on his shoulder and steadied him. He nodded firmly to James.

There was no time for celebration, however. Sam pushed them both into a run down the pathway that lead to the cave opening.

James's heart pounded, feeling like it would burst from his chest. He just about heard Sam call out, "In here."

Debris fell all around in showers of rocks and clouds of dirt as they reached the glowing light of the side opening. Sam paused to wave James in first.

James entered the gap and rounded the corner. He rested against the rock wall, gasping and wincing, as Sam joined him. His heart still pounded furiously. The collapsing cavern thundered from beyond the walls.

Opposite him, Sam's tired face gleamed with sweat in the low light.

"Well that was... something," Sam said breathily.

James lifted his head off the tunnel wall, grimacing with exhaustion. "I have no idea what just happened."

Sam regarded him for a moment. A crooked grin slowly formed, which grew into a beaming smile. He burst into laughter. James was taken aback, but then couldn't help but also laugh, somewhat more hysterically.

"That was some jump," Sam said between laughs.

James shook his head, sighing. "I... you were right. It was easier than I thought. Somehow. All this time..." he left the rest in his tired mind.

"We'll make an Oneron out of you yet," Sam said, clapping James's arm.

Another booming crash came from the cavern. The tunnel had a thick, hot air to it. The orange glow coming from somewhere around the corner made James absently think of firelight.

"Any idea why that place just collapsed?" James asked.

"I've heard of Phase Dragon's before. They're said to be able to cross through places, and time. I don't know if they ever truly existed, but I think that's where the idea of dragons being eternal came from."

"What do you mean, dragons being eternal?"

Sam shrugged. "Some say that dragon's spirits never go away. They exist for all of time. And throughout time."

James shook his head with exhaustion. "I won't even pretend to understand any of that."

"Come on," Sam said, gesturing to the side. "Let's see where this light goes."

They set off into the winding tunnel towards the orange light, which James had decided must have been coming from a fire. He wiped his brow and the sweat dripped from his hands.

Muffled sounds carried in the air. Possibly voices. James picked out the crackling of a fire. A grunt followed a rattling hiss and something solid hit the ground.

"That's Evan," Sam said, breaking into a run.

James ran behind him, and also picked out Evan's voice among the chaos.

They rounded a corner and approached a brightly lit room at the end of corridor. A large shape slithered across the entrance, its long tail flicking out of sight. A cluster of shiny trinkets and papers blew across the opening. Goblets, necklaces, and other clattering objects crashed around the room.

Sam reached the space with his sword drawn. James arrived and assessed the scene in front of them. A raging fire was burning a wooden table, casting the dome-shaped cave in a bright, flickering light.

Evan was up against the far corner, kept back by a large serpent that hissed and snapped its head at him. Its emerald scales gleamed in the firelight. James guessed the serpent's full length would reach somewhere around fifteen feet, though it was hard to tell with all the coils. At any rate, the serpent towered over Evan's small frame.

The serpent's oval head turned at their approach, its icy blue eyes glowing. Short limbs with stubby fingers protruded near the middle of its long body, and two more limbs pressed against the ground near the tail. A forked tongue flicked at them as the head

uncoiled from the body, rising up to the low ceiling. When the bulbous tail end rose, a green light emerged from between the scales, glowing like a dazzling torch light. In a swift motion, the serpent lunged at them.

Sam charged ahead and knocked away the flicking tail with his sword, spinning on his heel and striking out. The blade bit into the serpent's side, cracking the scales and spilling a bright green blood. The serpent reeled back, screeching and curling into a tight coil.

When the head shot out again, it spat out thick bile, which Sam caught on his sword. Several spatters hit Sam and singed his shirt, blistering his skin. The venom hissed and boiled on the blade. Sam twirled the sword, throwing off the remainder of the bile and revealing the untarnished blade, which continued to smoke.

Sweating profusely, James tried to fight through the sweltering heat and focus, gripping his knife tightly.

"Evan," Sam called out. "You okay?"

"I will be once I retrieve my sword," Evan called back. He sounded more angry than scared.

James followed Evan's eye line and saw the Voarn's broadsword on the wall beside a collection of other swords and knives, placed horizontally on hooks. Near them, the fire was spreading from the table to a large chest.

The serpent screeched and lunged at Sam, who ducked under the snapping head. Sam dove to the side and brought his sword up, slicing a thin line through the serpent's scales. Through the writhing coils of the serpent, the glowing tail shot out at Sam's head, but connected with the flat of his intercepting sword.

Evan took a step forward but the serpent's head jerked towards him, keeping him back. Hissing and snarling, it looked between Sam and Evan, with its back to James. If Evan could get to his sword, they'd all be in a better position to bring the serpent down.

A surge of energy rushed through James. Without thinking, he sped towards the serpent, raising his knife. The tail swung out and came for him, but he jumped over it and sailed through the air to land on the serpent's back. Gripping the cold scales, he tightened his legs around the thick body as adrenaline pushed him on. Grunting, he brought his knife up and plunged it into the flesh between the scales, spilling out pulpy blood. A foul stench hit him. He recoiled back and then jumped free as the serpent convulsed, screeching and hissing.

Evan appeared with his broadsword in hand. The blade swung across the serpent. It severed the head and sent it tumbling into the spreading flames beside the table.

Releasing a heavy sigh, Evan dug his sword in the ground and rested on the hilt. The serpent's tail rattled before it stilled and its light slowly faded.

"Everyone alright?" Sam asked.

"Considerably better," Evan responded, watching the serpent's motionless body.

Sam stepped to James. "That was some heroic move, James."

James made a sour face. "I guess. I didn't really think about it. Just saw the opportunity."

"You did real good," Sam said.

James nodded, and coughing through the stifling air. He regarded his knife, still stuck in the serpent, and decided to leave it. He turned and looked over the assortment of blades hung on the walls, and searched for a suitable replacement. Gold coins and shining jewels were scattered on the ground and on shelves.

"What is this place?" Sam asked, studying the burning area.

"A treasure trove," Evan told them as he sheathed his sword and slung the scabbard over his back.

James felt Evan watching him closely, and decided to focus on the wall of weapons instead. They appeared less dangerous than addressing Evan at that moment. He took a long knife from the wall, having to step closer to the spreading flames. He withdrew the knife from the simple sheath and glanced at the curved blade, before re-sheathing it. It looked like something he would be comfortable wielding, and was longer and thicker than his old knife.

"Good idea," Sam said, nodding towards James's new weapon.

A leg of the burning table collapsed. The large chest seemed to be slowing the flames for now, but they were reaching up for the wooden shelves above it.

"Time to go, right?" James asked. He clipped the knife to his belt where his last knife had been, on the opposite side from his grapple hook.

Sam nodded. "Time to go."

James couldn't wait to get out of the caves, but had the uncomfortable feeling that they still had a long way to go.

James, Sam and Evan have reunited again!

What did you think of the action in this chapter?

How is the story coming along for you so far?

Now our trio are together these opening chapters can start progressing the main story a bit more. But first they'll have to escape the caves, and knowing their luck, it won't be easy...