

Chapter Thirty: Escape Plan - Part Two

Up three more flights, he came to an open door between staircases. A soft wind and hot sunlight came through the doorway. He caught his breath and cautiously stepped closer, at all times listening for signs of pursuit. A concrete balcony ran along the side of the building, around six feet wide.

The streets of Riondon spread out below him. James hadn't realised he had ascended so high. The people below looked barely larger than insects.

A door burst open nearby, ringing in the air, and a moment later two guards rounded the corner of the building and ran along the balcony. James tensed. These guards wore helmets and were in polished black and silver armour. He didn't have time to think about who they were, or why they were after him.

The drop down below was too far. James surprised himself when he broke into a run towards them. He drew his sword, still not fully sure of what he was doing, but knowing he had to fight.

The first guard opened fire, spraying the railing and balcony with bursts of heat. James ducked as he ran, bringing his sword up defensively in front of him. A yellow-ish barrier expanded from his blade, catching the bullets with dull, heavy thuds. James startled, having forgotten that Liana had mentioned his new sword had shield tech. He raised the sword as the two guards fired again. As the shield caught several hits, a couple bullets thudded into his toughlet, sending jolts of reverberations up his arm. One struck the outside of his biceps, cutting a line across his arm in a spasm of sharp pain.

James grit his teeth and jumped up against the wall, and stepped alongside it before falling back to the walkway. He brought his sword down and cut through the rifle rising towards him, then shoulder barged the guard, shoving him back into the other one. Adrenaline surged through James, his earlier wariness and aches forgotten about. He surprised himself at how fast he could move, and was mostly able to ignore the pain in his arm.

James swung out and his sword dug into the shoulder armour of the second guard. He paused with the sword stuck in the armour – hesitated too long – and the first guard shot up and brought the butt of his rifle against James's jaw. James staggered back, seeing dark spots in his vision.

He regained his senses and charged into the guards again, trying to remember his training with Liana, and what Sam had taught him. But he couldn't think. He just moved, fuelled by adrenaline and the will to live. *Keep doing what they can't do*, he told himself.

Jumping up, he brought his knee into the visored helm of the front guard as he flew over them. When he landed behind them he swung his sword with both hands. The flat of the blade knocked the guard in the head and sent him spinning over the railing. James ignored

the startling image of the guard flailing through the empty air and swung out to knock the rifle out of the hands of the second guard. Another strike to the guard's chest armour knocked him off his feet.

Gunshots drew James's attention to a square below

Several armoured figures were gathered in a dense collection, surrounding two men. James's heart jumped. Both Sam and Castan were caught within a group of armed men. Many carried staffs and batons, and a few had rifles. Some wore the black and silver armour like the ones he currently fought with. Two scorches of burned earth sent wispy smoke across the square; familiar signs of Sam's fire magic.

Along the streets nearby, more Red Guards were closing in on them all.

The guard in front of James reached for the downed rifle. James's eyes darted between him and his friends below. He was wasting his time up on the tower while they were being attacked. Once the Red Guards down there came upon them, it would be over for them all.

James turned and in an instant he was on the balcony wall. He jumped off.

He soared through the empty air, completely helpless now as he fell. His entire body shuddered at the crippling fear that coursed through him, mingled with a thrilling rush. He cleared a short building and continued to fall towards the square below. He seemed to fall forever. What had he been thinking? He would surely break every bone in his body in the inevitable impact.

The air rushed over him, the sounds of the town growing louder. It was soon clear he had aimed the jump wrong - he hadn't even thought of trying to aim when he had jumped. A banner was strung up across a horizontal pole that stuck out from a building, and suddenly, in an instant, James knew exactly what to do. His free hand moved to the grapple hook on his belt. He saw his actions as he did them; before he did them. He raised his arm and fired. The hook shot out, unspooling for a long second, before the claw connected to the pole.

The line tautened and suddenly James was swinging, his body jolting with the sudden shift of momentum. He cut through the air in a long, wide arc. For a moment it seemed like his swing would slam him into the ground. Then he drew closer towards the group of armed men below and felt he was on target.

A few guards turned to look up at him, raising rifles. Sam moved in a blur, his sword striking several of them. A rifle lay by Castan's feet, but he had no way of firing it.

Once guard turned as James crashed into him, slamming them both to the ground. The world blurred a moment and James found himself on his back, coming to his senses. His sword lay several feet away. The downed guard was still beside him, large dents in his silver and black armour.

Shuffling footsteps and clinking armour came to James's dull ears. He tried to push himself up. Surprisingly, somehow, he was on his feet, as if with a renewed strength. He headed for his sword as a guard came upon him, swinging a baton. Sam barged into the guard, knocking him off his feet, and then spun away from a burst of gunfire before jumping into the next guard. He seemed to fly between them, darting like a javelin.

Others closed in on James, staffs and batons raised. He dove and slid towards his sword, reaching for it. A staff struck the ground and he snapped his hand back. James rolled through the dirt and found his bearings. He reached for the knife on his belt, but another guard was on him before he could draw it.

A staff swung at him and he ducked and brought an elbow into a guard's chin. A baton crashed down against James's back, dropping him to a knee. He pushed himself back and came up beside the baton guard. His footing faltered but he quickly readied himself and followed with a kick to the gut, causing the guard to keel over.

James tightened his fists, feeling the sweat squelch in his hands. The rough skin on his right palm reminded him of his failure at conjuring magic, and the frustration spurred him on.

He reached up and grabbed a staff with both hands as it came down on him. He fought for control as another guard swung at him, and managed to twist the staff in time to block the attack. He jumped up and wrestled the staff free as he flew over the guard, then let out a cry and slammed the staff into the guard's head, knocking him to the ground.

More gunfire rang out nearby.

Castan was curled up and pressed against a building, smoking holes on the wall above him. A rifle remained beside him, but without the correct Trigger Switch it was as good as useless. Sam cut down another guard and turned towards two more. The last two guards. Around them, the remaining guards were dazed on the ground, dead, or slowly recovering.

James sprinted to check on Castan. The Canarrian's eyes widened as he reached him. Shots exploded on the wall beside them, causing James to drop to his knees. He turned and saw another silver and black guard rushing into the square, rifle raised. Weaving between the two guards, Sam didn't see the rifleman aim at him.

James called out, but he needed to do more. He threw himself to the ground and reached for the nearby rifle. Training it on the approaching guard, he unloaded a barrage of blasts. The shots cut through the air in pointed shafts of light, spraying wildly. Several bullets popped into the guard, throwing him backwards in a cloud of dust. Sam ducked low and cut through the legs of the remaining guard.

Silence suddenly fell over them.

James remained on the ground, his entire body trembling. His senses came back to him in a slow, muted wave. He heard Castan rise behind him, the shifting of the dirt and sluggish

footsteps. He finally became aware of the small crowds that had gathered around the square, many people coming out of places of cover.

The rifle was still in James's hands. Somehow he had fired it without a Trigger Switch.

Sam approached him. His sudden presence finally shook James from his dazed trance. Castan came up beside them.

"James," Sam breathed, the surprise clear in his hoarse voice.

James dropped the rifle and lifted himself to his feet. He shared a concerned look with Sam before a more immediate threat came to him.

"Red Guards," James quickly said. "They're coming now. We have to go."

Sam nodded and Castan said, "This way."