

# The Escape

*The train jolted forward and began its three-hour journey to Koldichevo. Ethan Kanievsky glanced out the window, its glass pane a speedway for the rain that dashed across it.*

*“Why are we doing this, again?” asked Simon, Ethan’s six-year-old son.*

*“It’s important to me that you see this place,” answered Ethan. “Some really bad people did some really bad things at Koldichevo. We need to remind ourselves of their mistakes, so that we never make them again.”*

*“What happened?” Simon enquired.*

*For a long moment, a distant look filled Ethan’s eyes. Finally, he began.*

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It was 1944. Ethan was only 16 years old. He had been in the grim labor camp for just five weeks, but already his spirits had been crushed. Looking at his lunch--a meager one piece of bread and some watery vegetable soup--he wondered what his life could have been had he never been placed in the camp.

“Hey--Ethan,” a voice murmured.

“Yeah, Jared?” Ethan responded. Jared Caplan was Ethan’s best friend at the camp. He had met him three weeks back, when Jared first arrived at his barracks. He had somehow kept a fair bit of courage and hope, despite the best efforts of the SS-TV agents stationed there.

“There’s been some talk, and--” He paused, looking around discretely to make sure no one else was listening. “Shlomo Kushnir and some other prisoners are planning to break out.”

“What? That’s suicide,” whispered Ethan harshly. “They’ll die for sure, and once their little escape is over, we’ll all be punished for it.” Shlomo Kushnir was a member of their barracks. It didn’t matter if Ethan participated or not; if they failed, the whole barracks--maybe the whole camp--would share their fate.

“Ethan, do you want to spend the rest of your life in this place? This could be the chance we’ve been waiting for.”

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted by fellow prisoner Eli Frisch, who had just walked over to them.

“What are you fellows talking about?”

Eli had been one of the first to give in to the cruel dehumanization enforced by the Nazis. He had determined that they would never be freed, and thought it best to make his experience as painless as possible, with little regard to his fellow comrades. There was no way he was going to go along with breaking out, and he would certainly betray them if they told him. Best not to risk him overhearing anything; he and Jared would wait to talk about this proposed escape further.

“Nothing.” Quickly changing the subject, Ethan asked, “Did you hear what happened to Yonatan?”

“Yes, a real shame; from what little of him I’d encountered, he seemed like a nice guy. But that’s what happens when you try to steal more food than you’re given.”

Absently, Eli turned his head to look around. Ethan turned to Jared and nodded. He wasn’t going to end up like Yonatan, or anyone else of the countless that had been lost to Koldichevo, to any of the camps, to the Nazis. He had suffered long enough. He was getting out.

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Another grueling day passed, and it was finally time to go to sleep. As Ethan flopped down on his uncomfortable straw mattress, he closed his eyes and began to drift off.

“Ethan,” Jared whispered, leaning down over the top of the bunk bed they shared.

“What?” Ethan hissed back. *Could he not have any time to relax?*

“Did you think we were just going to wing our escape? We have to prepare, to practice.”

“Practice *what?* Running? I can do that just fine.”

“Crawling and creeping around. If we make one sound, we’re through.”

*Fair enough*, Ethan thought. And so for the next few days, once everyone else had fallen asleep, everyone in their barracks would practice sneaking around. Tip-toeing around on two feet was easy enough, but silently crawling was somewhat challenging. Ethan had never noticed how loud everything he did was until it was dead silent. Every breath, every rustle of his clothes, seemed to echo off every wall and surface for miles. He felt that at any moment he might wake another captive, or worse, alert a guard. But the fear of getting caught gave him focus, and he persisted as cautiously and quietly as he could muster.

It was a relief when he finally got the hang of it. He felt that he was ready to get on with the mission, but some questions still remained unanswered. Chiefly, how they were actually going to break out.

“You never really told me what the plan was, did you?” asked Ethan.

“No, I guess I didn’t.” replied Jared. “We’re planning to break out on the 17th, in three days.”

*Three days?! Freedom was so close he felt he could touch it. Three days, and he would be free of this horror. Three days, and he could begin to live, to be free to do as he pleased. Three days, and he could see the world.*

“As you can tell, they’ve almost breached the barracks wall,” continued Jared, pointing to the thin, chipped wall from which a cool draft blew. “They should be done by the 17th. Midnight that night, they’ll distribute cloth, sewing supplies, and knives. We’re to sew the cloth onto our shoes while we wait for them to finish with the wall, and the knives will be used for defense.”

“Wait, we don’t all get guns?” asked Ethan, surprised. “What are we going to do if they start shooting at us?”

“We have two guns, and--”

“Two?! They have an army of guards, and we have *two* guns?”

“And four grenades, plus a small bit of acid,” finished Jared. “Those were hard enough to get as it is. In case you haven’t noticed, it’s a little difficult to smuggle *anything* into a labor camp filled with Nazis, let alone weapons. We’re lucky we’re all getting knives. You need to learn to think before you speak.”

“Sorry, sorry, you’re right.” Ethan apologized. “I guess I’m just stressed.”

“Whatever it is, make sure you’ve got it under control by the 17th. We’ve got to work together if we’re going to get out of here.” replied Jared. Ethan nodded. What he said was absolutely true: he needed to calm down and trust in what his friend said; to acknowledge that he didn’t know everything that was going on, and that Jared and the others must have reasons for whatever they’re doing.

“I will,” Ethan assured him.

“Good. That’s enough practice for tonight. We’d better get some sleep.”

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It was time. The three days had trudged by at a painstakingly slow pace, but it would all be worth it in a few short hours. As he finished sewing the cloth to his shoes, Ethan mentally prepared himself for the task ahead. Right now, the watchdogs would have been poisoned and most of the guards would be asleep or distracted. Everything was in place; everyone was ready.

He rose, collecting his knife and taking a look at Jared, who had finished slightly before him. Jared nodded, and they gathered around everyone else already positioned at the wall. It was raining outside, which was perfect for their situation: almost any noise they made would be covered by the storm. It seemed that they were the last to complete the task, for not even ten seconds after, the wall had been breached, and a small stream of prisoners was trickling through.

“Once we’re clear of the fence, follow me.” whispered Jared, almost mouthing the words. “We’re to meet up with the Bellorussian partisans. They’ll help us.”

They slipped through the wall and into the cold, dark night. Even with the rain, every step he took felt like the thunderclaps overhead. He found comfort in remembering the cloth attached to his shoes, and the knife he clenched in a white-knuckled grip.

They arrived at the electric fence, and two prisoners stepped forward with tools to cut through it. Once they did so, the alarm would sound, and they would have a moment’s head start before the guards ran out to chase them. Ethan took a moment to quiet his mind and focus on the one thing standing between him and freedom: the ability to run fast enough.

*Snap. Snap. Snap.* He could feel his pulse quickening with every cut made to the fence. *Snap. Snap. Snap.* Then, suddenly, the blaring alarm.

“Go, go, go!” cried what Ethan assumed to be the leader of this whole operation, Shlomo Kushnir. He didn’t need to be told twice! Already, he could hear the guards fleeing from their posts. Three people in front of him. Two. One. Go!

He took off into the night, feet pounding against the dirt. He could see Jared in front of him, the smile on his face. *They were free!* And after they met up with the partisans, after this whole awful war was over, he could finally choose his path. He could finally live again.

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*Simon’s eyes were filled with awe as Ethan finished his story. Smiling sadly, Ethan reached out to place a hand on his small arm.*

*“I know my story ended well,” said Ethan, “But a lot of others’ were not so fortunate. This is why we’re here, on this train. We must remember those whose stories ended in pain, in sadness, in order to pay them respect.”*

*“I’ll make sure they aren’t forgotten, Dad.” said Simon.*

*Their train shook to a stop, and Ethan glanced out of the window, the station bathed in a warm yellow light. He remembered the time when we believed he had no chance of a good life, and reassured that young man that it was all going to turn out fine. He had a beautiful family,*

*and every day appreciated that which he was lucky enough to have. He had but one thing to thank for that: trust. Trust in his friends. Trust in God. Trust that one day, somehow, he would persevere. Trust was what had saved him.*