

## Chapter 10

I fell. My life started to flash before my eyes, but since I had seventeen thousand feet to go it took its time. Thus I had barely gotten past third grade and was still years from the really fun parts when something snatched me from the open air. With a surge of displaced wind I was sucked to the wall and held there by emaciated fingers.

A face with unnatural eyes and horrific teeth slithered forward from the veiled depths of the invisible crack I was in. The eyes opened wide and came straight for my mine. With panic strength I grabbed its neck and held it away. The neck distended and stretched, and the face came even closer. Straining, it got within inches.

“The mark, the touch, the taste, the smell,” its evil, sibilant voice whispered. “Here, here, here, her, an immortal one.” The creature was desperately reaching for my lips, sniffing with its freakish nose. “I must, I can, I will have it, have it now.”

The jaws opened and reached for me.

Three realizations came to me very rapidly. First, this creature was not human and was trying to kill me, possibly worse. There was no reason to feel guilty about anything I could do to it. Second, I still had my hands clenched around its throat. Third, the love of my life had just tried to kill me. It was amazing how upset that made me.

I beat it to death against the stone wall. In the dark my sight went white and did not clear until I saw I was smashing the bloody stump where its neck terminated into a rock. It took me three shuddering breaths to calm down. After that I examined the creature.

In death, sans head, it looked almost human. The hands were incredibly thin, bespeaking terrible privation. It looked almost dessicated. It was clad in a black and gray cloak that that moved fluidly to cover it.

You know, I thought, if someone goes looking for my body and doesn't find anything, they might get suspicious. And I am wearing brightly colored clothes. I'll be very easy to see.

I considered the dead monster, its human appearance, lack of distinguishing features, and the robe that had concealed it so well.

The sun had passed over the peak. Afternoon deepened towards evening, hiding the surface of the cliff. With the coming night was the coming cold. The blood of the earth was fading from my veins, allowing the frigid air to suck the warmth from my body. For the first time on Icstath, I could feel the cold. At night, here, this high, exposure would be a more certain death than the fall.

Climbing in the dark is murder. Without ropes any fall was deadly. I couldn't see the holds and soon after my “body” faded into the storm below I couldn't even see my hands. I didn't need to. Every move, every rock, every crag and crack was indelibly stamped into my mind. This final ascent had been the climax of my life up to that point. I had nothing to lose, and each inch I dragged myself up the nightmare brought me after her. We needed to talk.

When I clutched the sharp edge of the top of the Grand Face in my bleeding hand again the sun was gone. An amazing display of stars and beamed down from the sky, filled with strange galaxies and showers of burning comets. I yanked myself back onto the very spot of ground I'd left so suddenly before and gasped for breath as I lay on my back. One by one I picked out the familiar constellations.

When I came to the Hierophant I paused. The Hierophant was seven stars aligned to make a man holding a platter. It took a little bit of imagination to see it, but I remembered it from when I had been very interested in such things. Now, atop the platter, was a eighth star, pale blue and glimmering while all the others shone brilliantly. It took several seconds for realization to dawn.

“Ram.” The pale planet that appears only at very high altitudes, I thought. Osinius must be north, so that would put it right about- “There.” There it was. As pale as Ram, only red, it lurked by the edge of a starry nebula that hung above the head of the Bull like a halo. I examined the two of them and smiled. Suddenly, in their light, I felt warm and rested.

That is because hypothermia is setting in, the thought flashed through my mind. I lurched to my feet and looked around.

Foot prints, a while mess of them, lead the way up a wide snowfield before me. The snowfield was crusted over with ice and hard pack. The tracks rarely sank below the surface. Here and there great boulders jutted above the white, and the trail winded up through these. From what I remembered of the shape of the peak, the summit was several thousand feet above my current position. But this field would be the east shoulder, and I doubted it went more than a few hundred feet up. I scurried quickly after Carolyn.

The cuts on my hands were aching. Cold needles were jabbing at the tears in my skin. If there had been light I never would have let myself get injured, but there was none. Just fury, anger, betrayal, and that did little to light my way. Instead everything seemed darker than it had before. I tucked my hands into the moving robe.

I passed a small fist of stone that jutted out of the ice. The backside of it looked regular, and while I reconnoitered the peak I moved into the lee. Seeking shelter I found a small, broken door.

The seventh, I thought. There were no sounds. I reached out to probe with my hand, exploring the dim recessed. My cloak was still clinging to my fingers, wrapped around the lacerations. It didn't interfere with my search. The door had been broken. Fragments of it lay on the ground. Shortly beyond I found a foot. It was frozen solid, so cold that at the first touch I yanked my hand back like I had been burned. It was a demon; I was sure. Just as sure, I knew that it was recently destroyed, by either Cadian or Ludus.

Climbing up the side of the stone fist was a watchtower. I explored it quickly, learning that I could sense the dead demons by temperature before I actually touched them. They still smoldered with cold, like banked flames. On the roof was a lookout post, and two dark frigid piles lay in the shadows. I avoided them and stared up towards the summit.

The snow reflected the starlight, giving the mountain a luminescence that resembled a halo. But nothing moved, and there were no traces of the three I sought. Only to my left did anything break the pale continuity of white.

A very faint red glow was hidden in the ice. There was absolutely no reason for anything red to be there

at all. Something fluorescent was absurd. I wondered if it might be a light from my prey, but it was too steady to be moving. They would never be foolish enough to make a light if they were hiding still. That meant it wasn't them. I glanced down the mountain, to where I remembered other walls and towers being. They were dark. I couldn't imagine it was created by the seventh. That made no sense.

But red might mean fire, and fire meant I might survive the night. There was no other choice. It was too dark to find the oddly colored rock that I would need to find a drink, even if I could perform the ritual myself.

I stole back out the tower and across the barren peak.

Instead of a fire, I found a hole. It was a small crack in the mountain, perhaps thirty feet up the side of a frozen rock slide. When I had picked my way up and looked down, I saw that the hole was rimmed in strange sigils that were glowing softly with their own light. Beyond them the crack deepened into a shaft that ran straight and regular down into the stone.

Magic, I thought. That made me smile. Without further ado I climbed in and started worming my way down. It was narrow enough that if I flexed my shoulders I could stop my descent. Clearly artificial, it didn't seem to pose any danger of suddenly opening or tightening, so I didn't have to worry about getting stuck. The air coming up was warm but didn't smell of smoke. Down and down I went.

I emerged from the air shaft into a small cave. The walls were uncut stone, but the floor was smooth. Most oddly, veins of crystal ran through the ceiling, glowing with multicolored light. When I say multicolored I mean exactly that, for it began as blue and slowly fugged into red then a pale green, and continued through every one of the vast repertoire of colors I had learned at Northshore in a random sequence that never repeated. The crystal seemed to be natural. It certainly had no regular shape to the strata that ran through the walls. It glowed bright enough to light my way.

The cave wended through stone, slowly transitioning to worked stone. Eventually it came to a halt at a small metal door, forged of something that looked like steel. I pulled it open and saw a deserted corridor. Nothing moved. I shut the door and sat down against it.

Exhaustion hit me. I was dead tired. The climb had sucked my energy, Carolyn's betrayal was still boring holes in my world view, and the adrenaline and anger were gone. Nothing was left to keep me going.

Carolyn's words, which I had been forcibly ignoring, arose unbidden in my mind. I played you, Lee, like a drum. I played you. She had. The burglars had been burglars. The dinners had been meant to make me feel awkward but protected by her. I'd reacted by taking her climbing, demonstrating I was good enough to be useful to her. She had faked the surprise when we found Kuran's coffin. Ludus had probably hidden it there. That's why he was close enough to hear her call. The 'guard' at the gate had been exactly what he looked like, a thug getting high.

One by one I ticked off the memories of our time together and noticed each of them in some way furthered her goal of bringing me to Icstath. Everything had been orchestrated better than a fine symphony of manipulation. Maybe at the end she had felt a little sad. Maybe she had liked me. She had liked me enough to use it to make her act real enough to fool me.

She had told me she had my background checked. At that climbing tournament, just out of college, I

was probably in the best shape of my life, and unlike Jacob Gyles, the only man who had beaten me, I had no family to ask questions if I disappeared. If Jessica started asking around, she would simply disappear.

The door behind me opened inwards, and if I curled up with my back to it, it could not be opened without waking me. It was as safe as I was likely to get, and the room was warm. Without any reason to stay awake, I closed my eyes and waited for my thoughts to stop.

A hand on my shoulder shook me awake, gently.

“Go away, Carolyn. I'm not talking to you,” I muttered, still locked in a horrible dream. I wanted to stay in the dream, because the real world was worse.

The hand shook me again.

I groaned and opened my eyes. A woman, not Carolyn, stared down at me. Five or six of her friends pointed spears and swords at me. None of them was Carolyn.

Well, that certainly hadn't gone according to plan. Very, very slowly I turned my head to check the door. It turned out to be of the variety where the top and bottom could open independently. The upper half of it was wide open, and my body would have done nothing to warn me.

Wish I had noticed that, I thought.

None of the women in the room had moved except the one who'd awoken me. She had stepped back out of range and drawn a sword. All of them stared at me, waiting.

With my hands open and in plain sight, I moved glacially so I was sitting up. Gradually I lowered them to the floor to push myself upright, but that sent ripples of tension through the armed women and spears drew back to readiness. I stayed seated and kept my hands in the air.

“Hello,” I said. It seemed a good, neutral opening.

“Hello, child,” the one who had awoken me replied.

She didn't say anything else. I waited for a while, expecting the usual gamut of 'don't try anything, don't move, don't blink, don't think' that I saw on police videos, but instead they kept swords and spears leveled at me. I suppose if I was belligerent enough to try something in the face of that, warnings wouldn't help.

I wondered if I should be afraid at this point. I wasn't, but I sort of expected myself to be. I silently asked the emotional centers of my brain if anyone back there wanted to panic. They told me to handle this my own damn self. They were busy being mad at my ex-girlfriend. Another part of my head replied that she had never really been my girlfriend. I told the lot of them to shut up, as I had work to do.

Well, no one had hurt me and they'd certainly had enough opportunity too. “My name is Lee Harper. I'm from the Kingdom of Celephais.”

“Prince of Kuranos,” the speaker replied. “How have you come here?”

This was not the time to contradict anyone. “I climbed.”

The woman stared at me. I think she was taken aback. “The legions permitted it?”

“I avoided the legions. I climbed the Grand Face.”

“Lies,” she judged. Her comrades tensed to do hurtful things to me.

“How else would I have passed the legions?”

“You came on the white light. The aeroloft that passed in the night.”

“I was asleep then.”

“More lies. We saw you leave it, Prince of Kuranos.”

“Excuse me, but I'm not a Prince of Kuranos.”

“Then you could never have climbed the vast wall.”

She suddenly reminded me of someone. “I met Sylvia in the forests below. Do you know her?”

The woman looked at me, oddly, like I'd spoken nonsense. “We are all Sylvia.”

That made no sense at all, which reminded me of Sylvia all the more. “I met one who introduced herself as such in the pine forests by the river Rons. This was weeks ago, long before the aeroloft of last night.”

“Why have you come into our halls?”

“To escape the cold.”

“How could you have climbed the wall if you could not endure the cold?”

I decided to try something. “The Lady Kuranos required my assistance to climb the wall. She protected me from the cold. Once I had finished that, she cast me off the cliff to die. I survived but then lacked her protection.”

The speaker nodded, accepting that. This furthered my sudden believe that Carolyn was not nearly as nice as she'd appeared, and everyone but me knew it.

“That could be.”

“It is,” I agreed.

“But why would she have needed you to climb the wall?”

“Because she can't.”

“But you can.”

“I'm pretty good.”

“You're not a Prince of Kuranos, but can climb better than his bride?”

“Yes.”

“Lies.”

“Shall I prove it?”

That stopped her. “How?”

“That wall.” I inclined my head towards a wall at random.

She considered my suggestion. “Do it.”

I eased myself to my feet and walked to the wall. It was simple stone work, squared blocks laid without mortar. The cracks between them were tiny but enough. I sat down facing the wall, set my feet on it, and reached around until I found something deep enough to hold onto. With a grunt I pulled my butt off the floor, shifted my hands, and picked my way to the ceiling. Once there I put my feet flat against the wall and clung to a slightly protruding block. I pushed with my legs, pulled away with my hands, and held myself horizontal. I craned my head back to stare at the speaker.

“Eh?” I asked.

“Are you a magician?”

“No. I'm a painter.”

She opened her mouth and I knew what she was about to say.

“Would you stop telling me everything I've said is a lie? What do you want? Want me to paint something?” I lowered myself to the floor. “Do you want me to climb the entire Grand Face again? Pick the woman Sylvia I met in the woods out of a lineup? Show you my Bank of Phi credit cards? My high school diploma?” I crossed my arms and tried to stare the woman down. “My name is Lee Harper. I met Sylvia in the woods before I climbed the Grand Face. It's cold as balls out there. Are you satisfied yet?”

The woman stared back at me. I don't think any of my words had any effect on her. “What is a cold ball?”

“Oh, bloody hell, lady.”

The entire group drew back and tensed for a fight.

“And stop that! Now I've introduced myself. I mean you no harm.” An idea hit me. “But your hospitality is somewhat lacking, if you'll take my name and won't give me yours, by the way.”

“Your manner is coarse, but you reproach us truly in the name of Rhyksus. We are Sylvia.”

“I gathered. I meant what are your names, specifically.”

“Why? Do you mean to cast magic upon us?”

“Sylvia, if I was a sorcerer with that kind of power and intent, I would have already done it. I'm not a magician, I don't mean you harm, and I only came to your halls to escape the cold.” If they really thought I was a prince of Phi, they were probably scared of me. That made sense. “I come to you as a guest and ask for hospitality. I bring you peace.”

“What god do you worship?”

That was another good non-sequitur question, the type I expected from her. “Morpheus.”

“The God of Dreams.”

“The God of Celephais,” I agreed.

“The God of the Kuranos,” she countered.

“Who are the kings of Celephias?”

“You are welcome in the Prison Eternal.”

Oh joy, I thought. That sounds fantastic.

“Thank you.”

We stared at each other for another long silence. Talking to her was like pulling watermelons through a hose. “So can I have something to drink then?”

“Certainly. Come with us.”

Swords vanished into sheaths, and spears slid into slings on their backs. The half dozen of them shifted posture's to stand with polite attentiveness. Sylvia, the Sylvia who had been talking at least, walked to the door and opened it, beckoning me to walk through it.

I did. No sooner was I past then she struck me in the back of the head, and I fell unconscious.

End Chapter 10

Chapter 11

I had been sitting on a barstool when the drunk next to me asked, “You know what the worst thing

about chicks is?”

I grunted.

“They talk too fucking much. Every stray thought that crosses their mind two weeks out they tell you. I know what my girl is going to do weeks before she does it, know how she feels about everything, and don't care.”

“Oddly, I don't have that problem,” I replied.