

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 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.

“I bet it's her feelings then,” he observed. “She probably tells you everything about them, always harping about her emotions and that crap. Chicks are so emotional, and they never shut up about it.”

I shrugged. “Between the two of us, I'm the emotional one,” I told him.

“Fag.”

I woke up in a cold sweat. That memory from before I left Celephias was unnerved me. The bar had been quiet and secluded. It had low beamed ceilings, doors that barely met the fire code, and a bartender who had no desire to talk if he didn't have to. Not long after I'd tried and failed to kiss Carolyn, and long before we'd found Kuranos, I'd been thinking about her and needed to clear my head. That guy had forced me to remember the situation, then and now. I didn't want to think about her when I awoke. It left me irritated, foul tempered, and belligerent.

“Wakey, Wakey, darling,” Encouraged a fat guard. I was in a cell. My hands were bound in chains. That galled me immensely. In fact, the bindings suddenly infuriated me so badly that I forgot about my dream, Carolyn, and everything. My mood tumbled into free fall.

“I love you new guys,” the guard continued. He was looking down at me odiously. “Can't run, can't squirm. The elevation has probably twisted you up so bad you won't be able to stand on your own.” To experiment he grabbed my manacles and yanked me to my feet. “Try something, sunshine. I know you want to.”

I kicked him in the crotch. His face went white as he doubled over. I locked my wrists behind his neck and clenched up, holding him in position. Then I just kept kneeing him in the face, the chest, the groin, and the throat as opportunity allowed until he couldn't stay upright and I got sick of holding him. When I let go he hit the floor.

“There, I tried something.”

He had keys in his pocket. Stupid of him, I thought while I locked him in my handcuffs. I also took his knife and locked the door behind me when I left.

I was in a short corridor. There were five metal doors with barred windows that all looked identical to the one I'd left. I locked one and threw the keys inside. On the far end of the hall was an open doorway. It led to a small room with a desk, a chair, and a couple piles of chains and manacles much like those I'd just removed. Several barrels were stacked against one wall near the only other door. The desk was covered in pornography.

It was cheap smut of the low production value kind. Professionally I noticed the shoddy photography, poor layout, and amateurish airbrushing. The lighting was terrible. The girls weren't even that attractive to begin with. So my guard read this trash. I wanted to go back and hit him again for bad taste, but it seemed both excessive and impossible. The keys were gone, after all.

Women, I concluded bitterly, were the cause of all of my problems right now. The first had kicked me off a cliff, and the second had clubbed me in the head. The more I thought about it, the more sense it made. One dry voice in my head reminded me that Jessica was taking care of my living arrangements out of simple kindness, but I told that dry voice to go get bent. This was no time for logic. I'm telling you this because I want you to understand that this was precisely the wrong moment for the woman who walked into the room and tried to draw a sword when she saw me to walk into the room and try to draw her sword.

Cadian and Ludus had beaten this lesson into my head, and I mean that quite literally. They had ingrained a reflex that perhaps they intended to later take advantage of. I didn't know. Their trust balance was low. But ingrained it they had.

I would not beat an armed swordsman barehanded. It just wasn't going to happen. No matter how hard I trained or how superior the bodyguards' style of combat, a few weeks of combat training would never outmatch a serious opponent. I remembered Cadian explaining it to me in a rare moment of loquacity.

“Do not underestimate the sword. It's been used for thousands of years because it works. It may be the most efficient melee weapon on Pallas. Every bit of it is either for holding, stabbing, or slicing. Occasionally you might hear nonsense about weapon users being weaker than barehanded combatants.” He snorted expressively at the idea. “People have used swords and invented the same weapon in a dozen countries. They wouldn't do that if it wasn't effective. If you have one and someone else with one tries to engage you, run. If that happens and you don't have one, run faster. I'm not going to teach you the techniques to fighting a swordsman empty handed. If you have five years, learn them and hope you never have to use them against someone who spent those same five years learning to chop empty handed idiots apart.”

“So if I ever get attacked by a swordsman I'm just screwed?” I'd snapped.

“No. There is one time when you have a chance. When he's drawing his blade, he has removed one hand from the fight, as well as either his hips or shoulders depending on where the scabbard is. You still have two hands. You can beat him only if you do it before he gets the weapon out. We're going to go over one pattern to take advantage of that.”

“Why only one?”

“Because you want that pattern as fast as possible if you need it. If that sword leaves the sheath, you're dead. You have one chance to succeed and if you fail you're dead, so there's no reason to worry about a 'plan b.'”

After that Cadian had not spoken for three days. I think he'd strained his jaw muscles.

When the woman came through the door, I noticed her hair, long and brown that looked exactly like Silvia's. She wore earth toned clothing that matched her tanned skin, just as Silvia had. She also had a short sword, just like the one Silvia had clubbed me in the back of the head with. That was infuriating, come to think about it. She went for her weapon, and I went for her.

My palm caught her forearm before she finished drawing. With my weight behind it I slammed her blade back into the sheath and drove my shoulder into her body. She rocked back to keep her balance, but I kept coming, charging through her and taking her off her feet. My other hand grabbed the weapon while I planted my feet and torqued my hips against the direction of movement. I yanked the blade away from her, tearing it from her hands and the sheath. She fell and rolled, but froze on the verge of standing with her own blade an inch from her face.

“Lady, I don't know what kind of crazy mountain sword jiu jitsu you know, but I'll bet my life I can put this entirely through your head before you can try any.”

“I believe you. Will you let me live if I don't?”

Her voice was very soft and very low. I expected curses, death threats, or anything else. It brought me up short, and I suddenly faced the question of cold blooded murder.

Exactly what was I going to do with her? I certainly could have killed her, and probably should have in the fight, but just as certainly wasn't going to now. I made my best mean face while I tried to think of an answer to convince her that I not only would, but was looking for an excuse to.

“Shut up.” I evaded the question.

I inched forward and around her, trying to get away from the jail. Without prompting she rolled out of my way. When I came to the far doorway, we regarded each other in solemn silence. Then I ran.

Beyond another reinforced doorway was a vast cavernous room. The jailing area exited to a catwalk hundreds of feet above the floor. Below me that floor stepped up and down in mad terraces that rose and fell on both sides as they vanished into gloom. Thousands of golden pods composed of what looked like tinted glass stood in disarray on every tier. They were clustered about inexplicable assemblies of iron and bronze chains and gears. Small walkways picked between them like forest pathways. The catwalk I was on was only a few feet wide, but supported with triangular buttresses of steel. Neither side had a handrail. This walkway was one of many that rambled about the open air of the upper reaches of the great chamber, leading off at all angles. I kept running.

About a hundred yards along I saw a party of figures coming towards me. They spotted me about the same time and raised a shout. I glanced over my shoulder and saw the Silvia I'd disarmed was standing in the doorway, watching me silently. To my left was nothing, but ten feet away to the right was a catwalk that crossed above mine before it stopped at more nothing. There seemed to be no explanation. The horde was almost to me.

I didn't have a sheath, Making the jump with a naked blade would be foolish bordering on stupid. I couldn't help but throw back my head in a sudden wild cackle of resigned laughter before heaving the

weapon back across the catwalk towards its proper owner. It tumbled and slid across the metal walkway, coming to a halt with the pommel butting against her toe. "Thank you!" I yelled and took a flying leap off the edge.

The new catwalk was as well supported as the one I'd left. I caught a hanging flange of steel and held on. Then I pulled myself up and scuttled away, keeping low. A small rain of short knives clattered off the metal below me and whistled past above. I thought thin thoughts and scooted on my face, hoping a low profile and the angle would protect me. Nothing cut me, so it must have.

The hanging walkway took me away, weaving between the vast Gothic pillars that supported the ceiling. Soon I was far out of sight and could stand to run. Still, it wouldn't take them long to get to me. When I spotted a winch inset on the ceiling with its line already run to the floor I wrapped my hands in my shirt and slid down.

Once on the floor I raced along one of the pointlessly meandering paths between the pods. When the paths intersected I switched routes, trying to get away from my point of descent. Very quickly the twisting random route utterly confused me. I was completely lost. That wasn't a problem. I hadn't known where I was to begin with, so I wasn't any worse off. In addition, it was one extra problem for any pursuers. If I didn't know where I was, no else did, so I breathed a sigh of relief at the silence that told me no posse was after me. Free and away from everyone, I finally had a moment's peace.

"Well, young man, exactly what do you think you're doing here?" demanded a querulous old voice immediately behind me.

I rolled my eyes and embraced resignation. Then I turned around.

The speaker was a withered old geezer about five foot six, rail thin with a face like a goat. His shiny bald head was a little below eye level with me. He had a brownish smock on and was pushing a cart of tools and appliances that resembled an airline stewardess's sally into the field of mad science. I opened my mouth to start bullshitting when he cut me off.

"Not that it matters of course, because whatever it is you thought you were about to do you aren't right?"

I tried to agree with him. He cut me off again. "Because you aren't going to do anything you were about to do unless you're about to do exactly what I think you should do, and right now I think you shouldn't do anything until I think you think about what I think you should do."

I didn't even try to respond. He poked me in the gut with a cane. It only hurt a little, and I was grateful for it. I'd been wondering if this had been some kind of absurdly confusing dream. This was exactly the kind of nonsensical crap I expected out of my subconscious. That thing had made me fall for Carolyn. Thanks, id.

"Why you young kids are always running around in my laboratory, which admittedly hasn't happened in a while, is beyond me. It hasn't been the same, really. Everything around us is one of the lesser holdings of the Ark Eternal, and these wee beasties half the size of a toad lick fly don't want to be disturbed by any other beasty, wee or wane, not more than half the size of a half sized toad lick fly, which is wee indeed, which you, young man, are not. So what are you about to do? You're going to come with me. Right?" His speaking cadence was fast and varied wildly in tone.

He stared at me through small, beady eyes. I stared back. He jabbed me in the gut again. "Right?"

"Right," I agreed.

Let's be clear about this. I have no idea why I followed the old lunatic as he lurched off into that strange terrain. At the time I was confused by my actions, and looking back at them now when everything is done, I can only shrug and admit ignorance. I have no idea what I was trying to do. The thing is I had to do something. There were no other choices. Besides, I still wanted revenge. I kept telling myself that. It was a hollow desire that I felt I should have more than I truly did. I shook my head to clear that line of thought.

Off into the unknown we went. Withered as the geezer was he set a quick pace. He gesticulated wildly as he began a torrent of a narrative that merged from subject to subject in such chaotic juxtaposition as to leave me with no idea what exactly he was speaking about. Several times he jabbed me with his cane in what I took to be instructions to push the cart. I did, mainly to have something to do with my hands.

"And so you see, young man, what exactly it is that I say. You see, I said I say one thing, and that one thing is in fact quite simple, but the staggering looking of blithering mental staggering that lies unfolded upon the face from which you see is clearly seen to me and says that you don't understand what it is that I say. Say then to me what it is that you see that causes me to see such an unsaid curiosity upon you, no doubt unseen by you, but then who can see from when they themselves see? Speak!"

I think I understood that. This frightened me a little, so I pointed my arm at a random thing and asked, "What's that?"

"That is the Pnakotic Orb of Ovardrom the Vast, self-styled Last Lord of the Behemoth, though after he was subdued there were five or six of them. That," the old lunatic jutted one finger off aside us, seemingly at a entire batch of nearly identical golden eggs. "Is another. Kusaron All Ender, in point of fact lies in the orb that in fact I point to where it, and he, lies. He was the last lord of the Behemoth. The Last Lord, who was in fact one of the middle ones, seventh in the line if I recall, lies at last by the last lord in fact."

I seized on the first words he spoke, "So these big round things are Pnakotic Orbs? And in them are people?"

"People, my dear boy? People!?" he exclaimed the question in shock. For several seconds he ceased the cascade of babble inadvertently, working his jaw in silence while staring at me askance. I wondered if I'd just insulted his mother. "Ovardom the Vast was no person! He was-"

"The Last Lord of the Behemoth before the others. Right. Got that." Beginnings of a headache were making themselves known.

"Indeed," the old geezer pronounced. We strolled along while he nursed his injured dignity.

For the record, no, I had no idea what was going on. It will become clear soon enough.

We wound through the maze of bizarre things that covered more floor space than an underground vault should have. The ceiling was far enough overhead that perspective began playing tricks on me. This

chamber itself seemed impossibly huge. Nothing supported the ceiling but the walls, and those were so far away I couldn't understand the mechanics of it. We had been walking along for ten or fifteen minutes by this point, tracing an erratic serpentine path. Suddenly we stopped before one that loomed over us. It was of immense girth barely constrained by the metal band that every orb seemed to have. I gauged its height at about seventy feet. This one stood almost alone by an equally immense clockwork machine that controlled several chains and cables that disappeared into holes in the floor.

“This one, you can tell, is either very young or constraining a being of incredible power. The orb size at creation is proportional to the power of the entity who rests within, and decreases over time. Ultimately, it will disappear all together, as the Ark Eternal moves it to the Prison complex, from which there is no escape. Some of the greater beings of ancient times are so intensely potent that their vessels erode like granite under water, and they can be seen littering the area. This one, fortunately, is no such thing,” the mad geriatric informed me in a totally level tone. Contrarily to everything he had previously said, he spoke with clipped coherency.

“Who's in it?”

“Not who, child. What. *Connochaetes taurinus*. The Brindled Gnou.”

“Demon of the ancient world? Terror of the mythic age? Old one?” I hazarded.

“No. A wildebeest from the desert kingdoms. Surly, admittedly, but ultimately stupid and benign. It's our newest arrival. I imprisoned it within its Pnakotic encasement three days ago.”

I was too nonplussed to speak.

“Compare, if you will the size. To your left is the orb that constrains Offar Origgussen. Notice his orb is less than six feet in diameter. Estimate its age compared to this one.”

Offar Origgussen rang bells. In my third year at Northshore my perspective and lighting class had visited some of the ancient crystal paintings from the Celephian Museum's collection of antiquities. As I recalled, Offar Origgussen had been in one called the Fall of Man, and had shown an impressively pissed off looking codger astride the bodies of children while lightning immolated his enemies. Enemies I'd assumed had slaughter the aforementioned children. Now I had doubts. But if memory served, the enemies of most likely evil Offar had been wielding bronze spears. That translated to really, really old.

“What's the point of imprisoning a wild cow, though? Is it necessary to make an orb that big?” I asked.

“Yes, but not for the wildebeest. You see, the antelope is a place holder. It's isn't a cow. One must not confuse a cow and an antelope. That would be unseemly.”

“My apologies. A place holder for who?”

“There are two choices for an occupant depending on which occupant should present themselves for occupancy first. “ Almost as if a switch had been thrown, the surgical precision of the the wizened geriatric's tone began to fade, and the previous rambling nature of his speech started to return. I wasn't sure if it was based on some interior trigger, like the topic of conversation, or simply a matter of time and duration. “Should it prove possible that the possibility of Casstrianix Cris be upgraded from

unlikely and impossible to probably possible or betwixt to improbably possible, we positively must place as the potential occupant.”

“Why?” I interjected quickly, before he tangented off onto more nonsense.

“Oh, to stop her designs upon releasing the last King Kuranos of Celephias, of course,” he replied. The oncoming lunacy held off as he continued, “Should she be stopped to save Celephias, she should certainly be sustained within such a sepulcher.”

“And the other occupant?” I inquired, uncomfortably. I had an inclination as to the answer.

“The one who came with her. The painter. Harper, of Nirmo, I believe I was told when I was informed who he was. If he still lives, of course.” The old man paused and looked at me thoughtfully.

I was amazingly not surprised. “Yeah, that guy. You'd better get him if you have a chance. The man was a lunatic. Dangerous. But I heard he's dead.” I figured I might as well jump on the 'Get Lee Harper' bandwagon while I could; peer pressure, you know.

“No, not from what the Elysians tell me. Apparently, Lady Kuranos kicked him off the Grand Escarpment, but the body hasn't yet been recovered. Very important we keep that news from Lady Kuranos, of course.”

“Why?” I snapped. “So she doesn't feel like the job's left incomplete?”

“Oh, no. The harper is the key to Lady Kuranos, who is the lock which binds Lord Kuranos to the world of Pallas.”

“And which is why I'm going to kill you right now and be certain about it. I can frame Carolyn for it later,” came a voice from the catwalks high above. I looked. Staring down at us from the catwalk that lead to the prison rooms I'd so recently fled was a man in black and green robes. His eyes and face bore a resemblance to Claudius but were harder. His features seemed to bear malice in equal parts with contempt. His eyebrows swept up and back from his nose, coming to points that resembled horns. Black, very short hair in the military style framed his face. He crackled with an unhealthy vitality that energized his movements and burned his features into my mind across a distance that should reduce him to a tiny blur. “Alchemist, hold him! I'll murder him myself, we can ruin everything left that's good in the bride of Kuranos, and then our ascension to power on this earth will be inevitable.”

Claudius had two brothers. One was a few years younger, and seemed to fill his time by making preteen girls swoon on the music channel. He did some kind of syrupy, overly whiny music that turned the hearts of soft headed women to mush. Actually, Jessica listened to it too, so I guess it wasn't just the soft headed members of that sex, but for the life of me I couldn't get behind it. This was not that guy. His other brother was officially dead. He had been missing for years after some escapade in Vohryther that involved a fire. That brother's name was Van, and I think I just figured out where he was. Also, his condition had been upgraded from 'dead' to 'terribly alive.'

I turned to run. The alchemist was in my way, so I knocked him flying to be sure he didn't have any doubts about where his loyalties lay. He tumbled backwards and hit the orb, which melted instantly into a viscous flow of gold fluid. At the center was one baffled wildebeest, momentarily still some forty feet above the ground. It tumbled and bounced off arcane alchemical equipment as the pnakotic gel poured

down a winch hole. With a confused look, it disappeared.

Van stepped off the catwalk above me. He didn't try to slow himself at all. The granite floor broke his fall when he hit, dropping to one knee and driving his fist into the floor with a thunderous detonation. Small outcroppings and floor fixtures exploded. When the dust cleared and Van rose after having picked a fight with the ground and won, he shook off his knuckles with disdain. Dirt annoyed him. When he stood up, glowering at me, I just gave up and fell backwards down the hole after the antelope.

End Chapter 11