

Chapter 12

It wasn't that far to fall. Some gears and cables slowed my fall, letting me scuttle down them. The shaft was also sharply angled, so I slid partway on my butt. At the bottom it opened up to a long hallway. About halfway along, I noticed a dark skinned chap standing in my way, talking to the wildebeest soothingly. It was confused and nervous but didn't appear to be acting like a threat.

“Who're you?” I demanded.

“Who're you?” he countered.

“Lee Harper,” I replied. We could do the who 'I asked you first' nonsense for hours, but I didn't have hours.

“Horatius.”

“Well, Horatius, I'm going to be going past you, now. It's been a pleasure.” By the way, I never did anything dumb like stopping running. We were hollering at each other as I closed the distance as fast as I could. Already I was contemplating my options for getting past the guy and an antelope in the hallway. I'd decided it was basically impossible, but had every intention of finding out for sure.

“Stop. Now. A Prince of Phi commands it.”

Van roared behind me. His words had a power in them that tried to bog me down and prevent me from moving. It gripped me for a heartbeat, but blood pounded in my temples and I fled even faster.

“A Prince of Phi, eh?” asked Horatius amused. He patted the beast on the head and whispered something to it. Its eyes went wide and wild. I was at them by this point. The herbivore's head was lowered to put its ears by the strangers mouth so I did what any sane man would and vaulted it. I cleared the animal just as Horatius smacked it in the side.

The wildebeest charged. It's hooves beat a staccato beat on the polished stone floor. It filled the corridor, a solid mass of charging flesh that bore down on Van, leaving nowhere to run too. Van didn't run.

He set his feet and pivoted, throwing a single punch with his right hand that left his hip and collided with the forehead of the beast in a stunning crack. The animal came to a dead stop. Its rear legs slid forward under it, letting the spine curl under, and it collapsed onto its butt. It still filled the hallway. Van shook out his hand and scowled.

Then he grabbed a horn, climbed over the top of it, and dragged the stunned animal's head behind him. When he was on the other side of it, in plain sight of Horatius, he reached back, and manhandled it until he had a good grip. Then he planted his feet again, got his hip into it, and threw the five hundred pound animal down the hallway at us. I'm not sure who was more surprised, Horatius or the wildebeest.

I grabbed him and dove backwards, taking the both of us onto the lift. The doors weren't quite wide enough for the flying antelope. It caught both sides of the frame, buckling it in, but couldn't get through. Instead it hung there like a cork. It was only able let out an extremely confused, “Moo?”

I could see Van's feet under the animal's butt, walking towards us quickly and angrily, like a severely pissed-off ax murderer in a horror film. I cut the rope in the center of the shaft that lead to the counterweight below, and we surged upwards, away from him.

“Whatever possessed you to do that?” I snapped. “Didn't you recognize Van?”

“Well, yeah,” he replied. “But I didn't expect that!” I could hear the excuses in his voice.

“Well why not? You know that Van is one of the princes of Phi, right?”

“He threw a wildebeest at me!” Horatius quibbled.

“Ah, yeah,” I retorted, wondering if I had seriously misjudged Horatius' mental capacity. “He's a prince of Phi. You have to expect that sort of thing.”

“Excuse me,” he snapped. “Wildebeest throwing caught me off guard.”

“Listen, didn't anyone explain to you why Phi has had a monarchy for the last thousand odd years? Didn't you ever wonder why we didn't turn to a democracy, have someone outside the house try to take power, or anything else like that? It's because those guys, Van, Claudius, and the rest are the sons of the god Morpheus and not in a vague hypothetical way that extends to all of mankind. No, they are literally the descendants of a god.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. Oh.” We were shooting upwards, and I was beginning to wonder what was above us that would stop our precipitous ascent and whether we would survive the process. “Listen, Phi isn't like any of the other lands on earth. We aren't all very religious because of faith or culture or incentives, though the church being the world's largest drug dealer does help. On Phi are the gods. They live there. They walk around. I've met people who've met them in person. One, Morpheus, sired our royal family and has blessed them with all manner of insane abilities that set them above the rest of us normal men like speech helps us stay above a gopher. You don't piss off the royal family because they aren't men like the rest of us, and you don't piss off the gods, because they just might notice, get mad, and smite you into a hole in the ground. Or they'll tell the royals to do it for them, and the end effect is the same. Some of the princes are nice guys. Claudius is one. Some aren't. Kuranis is the dictionary definition of asshole, you may have noticed. And some of them are just really, really irritable. That guy below, Van, is one of those. With me so far?”

“I think my tutors left out a few important notes when they instructed me on the monarchy of Phi.”

“The royals are usually very discrete, and we don't really believe it all the way. Most other countries just think the stories are legends. Trust me, I did too. But the stories are true, and that guy you just irritated threw a quarter ton wildebeest at us. Do not do that again.”

The antiquated lift lurched suddenly. Squeals of metal on stone ripped from the sides where the long rails we ran on were twisted, showing this was the extent of the lift's usual route. When the side runners dragged us to a stop the cable that ran to the counterweight thrummed with tension. Horatius and I looked for a means of egress.

Several feet below a corridor opened in the wide of the shaft. It obviously had been unused for quite some time. Unlike the others, this one had no doors. It stood open and desolate.

I climbed down one set of rails and looked in. It was an empty corridor. I shouted this up to Horatius and he came down to meet me.

“Listen,” he whispered. “Hear that?”

I didn't think I did. “Nothing but elevator noises,” I replied.

“Exactly.”

I stared at him, lost.

“Our lift stopped, right? So why are cables still moving?”

Realization dawned. One of the other counterweights was in free fall, pulling another lift up after us. If it stopped on the tracks near where ours had, there would be only one way we could have gone.

“Run?” I suggested, already taking my own advice.

“Let's,” he agreed.

We fled down the hall. It ran straight and monotonous for a while before letting a single branch off to the left.

“You keep going,” Horatius told me. “I'll take this.”

“Why don't you go straight?” I countered.

“Because this way leads to the catacombs; it's a rats nest of cross passages and tunnels. You'd get lost and never be found. That way leads to the Basilica of Stone. With your cloak of deception you can climb up the gargoyles and hide. No one ever looks up, right? He'll never spot you.”

I didn't agree but had no time to argue. Besides, Van should only be mad at Horatius. On the chance that he did follow me, he might be calmer if he spotted me alone.

“Fine. Good luck,” I decided.

“You too.”

We split.

As he said, shortly down the passage I came to a vast opening. The walls were lined with buttresses that supported a black ceiling hundreds of feet overhead. Both pillars and walls were lined with statues, bass reliefs, and stone monsters that leered, cavorted, and reenacted forgotten bits of history. I picked the backside of a buttress that was only dimly lit by the fluorescent quartz veins and hoisted myself up to the highest empty spot. I perched there four stories above the floor, wrapped in my cloak, and

stopped breathing.

Van came running in and stopped. I could hear his footsteps. He wasn't even trying to be silent. He walked forward, stopped, walked forward, stopped, and came into my field of view. I saw him check right and left, and then sweep his gaze up both directions. His gaze stopped on me. Moving with malicious deliberateness, he strode to the foot of the column and began to climb. He didn't look any calmer.

“Aw, hell,” I concluded.

I turned and sized up the stonework above me. It had been smoothed and polished. The only breaks in the finish were tiny notches where the great blocks had been laid together. It would be virtually impossible to climb. Maybe it would stop Van.

I reached up, stuck my fingers in a crack, and pulled. There I could put a bit of my toe in a vertical crevice and twist to get purchase. After that I found a small indentation with my other hand. Pulling both hands together I held myself up enough to move my free foot to the same crack as the other. That brought a tiny bump within reach. This was as hard as the toughest stuff I had been doing at Northshore, but then I had been able to see. The shadows I had hoped would hide me now rendered this as difficult as the Murder on the Grand Face. When I glanced back, Van was standing on top of a gargoyle, staring up the wall at me.

“I don't suppose we could work this out? Sit down over beers, maybe a pot of coffee, and talk this over?”

“Yes. Come down here, and we'll discuss it.” His voice was rich with menace.

“No, thank you. I'm good here,” I demurred.

I gained a little more elevation by the time Van hit the top course of statues. He reached out, gripped the stone, and pulled himself off his feet. I turned back to the wall and scrambled higher. After that I came to a terrible section, one that took so long to surmount I refused to look behind me lest I see him reaching for my leg. Every second I thought I would fall. My blood was racing, and my pulse thundered in my ears when I got to a long vertical notch. The next twenty feet went quickly. Finally I couldn't help it and glanced down while I caught my breath.

Van was at the first move of that section. He held on by a tiny protrudence the size of a cat's nipple between his thumb and right forefinger, and that was it. The next hold was a sloped notch, and I doubted he had the technique to use it.

“We could talk about it here,” I suggested. “Before you go any further, wouldn't you at least like to explain your side of things to me?”

Van glared balefully at me. That was new. I had received scowls, frowns, grimaces, and one girl had stared daggers at me. Up till now I'd never truly understood what baleful meant. Now I did. Van wanted to hurt me, badly, at the same visceral level I wanted not to be. He readjusted his grip on the nipple, set his feet against the wall beneath him, and crouched. I refused to believe he was about to do what my eyes told me he was about to do until he did it.

Off two fingers he threw himself eight feet up the rock. At the top he splayed his arms wide and caught himself with his pinky finger in a crack the size of a pigeon's butt hole. He swung his body up, jamming his fingers into the base of the crack I was on and matched his grip. Two insane moves had taken him past fourteen feet of stone I had barely been able to climb.

I scrambled up faster, really panicking now.

At the top the buttress leaned in to meet its opposing number. At their vertex they held the roof beam, a long ornamental runner of stone that was heavily decorated with mythological carvings. The bottom of each side was notched to form a wide baseboard. I hooked one heel on each side and began scrambling along upside down like a retarded monkey.

Van was still coming after me. He had given up on climbing entirely in favor of simply hurling himself from handhold to handhold. His previous maneuver hadn't been a unique feat of strength. No, he was casually capable of throwing himself a dozen feet or more upwards with one arm. The only thing that slowed him down was the difficulty of spotting the next place to grip. Darkness had saved me. When he came to the central beam he grabbed on either side and started swinging along, exchanging his grip.

“Tell me, boy,” he asked angrily. “Did your mother spend time with a monkey before you were born?”

That infuriated me. “My mother's dead, asshole.”

“Good. You'll meet her soon.”

I wanted to throw something at him. There were no loose rocks. I got to the edge of the beam and shifted to the wall above the nave of the cathedral. A vent shaft opened above me with a small current blowing up. I hung at its lip. Van was almost to me.

“Too bad your mother never spent time with a king of Phi,” I shot back at him. “Then you might have caught me.”

Like most people who dish it out, he couldn't take it. Van screamed incoherently and hurled himself after me. He missed his next grip and fell, thrashing and flailing through the air. He caught the wall far below, almost out of sight. I laughed and turned my back, letting my derision be the last word as I went up the vent shaft.

The problem was that while I could put some distance between us, there was no way to lose him. The shaft ran perfectly straight with no side openings until it stopped in a round room with brass walls and steel ceiling and floor. In the very center was one of Pnakotic orbs that the mad alchemist tended. It must have been incredibly ancient, for it stood some nine feet above the ground. Its girth was perhaps thirty feet at the waist. Other than that there was nothing in the room, not that there was much space for something else to be. There was one other exit on the ground floor.

I backed up until I met the wall, trying to see the center of the ceiling. If the shaft had been for ventilation, it would need to continue up. I sidled around, trying to tell if there was a way to escape up there, but the confined room coupled with the girth of the orb hid what I was looking at. This frustrated me until I realized it meant the top center of the orb would be a perfect place to hide. I scrambled up one of the stilt-legs to the metal ring about the waist. It was close enough to the wall that I could leap off, bounce off the wall, and land where the orb began to level out. Splayed flat, I wormed myself up

until I couldn't see the floor or the shaft. It turned out there was no continuing hole above, so I tried to breathe quietly and laid the side of my head down. I listened very hard, waiting for Van.

“Worshiper of Morpheus, hear me I beseech thee,” came a deep rumbling voice that seemed to touch the inside of my ears and reverberate through my bones.

That was absolutely not what I had been listening for. The mountains were obviously driving me mad.

“No,” I replied, then silently cursed myself for saying that aloud. Talking to myself was only a bad sign if I answered back, right?

“Listen to me, man-child. The Son of Kuranos comes. Thou knows no mortal can escape a godling.”

“Would you shut up?” I snapped.

“Would thou like to be saved?”

“Yes, but not by an auditory hallucination that talks like a renaissance fair reenactor.”

“My mode of speech matters not if I can save you,” it replied. The voice was softer now and seemed more cunning.

I was amazingly sick of this, but the voice had a point. “Who, or what, are you? And what can you do for me?”

“I am Al-Azhad, one of the true lords of the sky. The first Kuranos imprisoned me when she created this place.”

“Kuranos the First was a woman?” The history books had omitted that.

“Indeed. I bear her and her progeny no love. If you free me, I will save you and thwart her descendant. It will make freedom even sweeter.”

I thought back about what I knew of the first Kuranos. He, or maybe she, had been dead a really long time. She'd founded Celephias by raising the island from the depths of the Circle Sea, saved the day, defeated the bad guys, and basically been an all around great king. Queen. Whatever. I'd never seen anything that lead me to believe the mysterious talking voice in my head, but paintings of Kuranos the first tended to make him fifteen feet tall with angelic wings and Morpheus sitting on his shoulder. I was prepared to believe that wasn't entirely accurate either.

I was also really desperate. Van was making noises of strain and grunting as he heaved himself up the shaft below. This idea of hiding was looking stupider and stupider by the moment, and Van was coming.

“I don't even know how to free you,” I told him.

“Manling, I have been imprisoned here a very long time. I know the ways of my prison. The blood of the earth will dissolve this shell on contact.”

I glanced around the metal covered walls and floor. “Good luck with that. Can't get any.”

“But you've consumed it. It is still within you. Your own blood will suffice.”

My own blood would work? Well, I had been living off the stuff for weeks. It seemed reasonable. Besides, I didn't have any better ideas.

I took the knife I'd taken from my jailer and pricked my finger. Before I let anything touch the orb I asked, “How do I know you're going to help me? How do I know you won't just flee?”

“Mortal man, even if I escape this binding, the magic of the Eternal Prison would reclaim me should I leave you. I must take you with me else I've simply moved my incarceration. Besides, revenge, even upon her children, is sweeter to me than freedom.”

The voice was smooth and pleading. Van's noises were almost to the top of the shaft. Relying on basic decency certainly hadn't been working for me up to this point. Perhaps putting my faith in the baser emotions would work. I started bleeding on the orb.

Unlike the orb I'd broken before, this amber sphere shattered cataclysmically at the first drop. The walls rang like a gong, and the earth shook. Geysers of polychromatic flame exploded from the spiderweb of cracks raced from the sizzling drop of blood. In a heartbeat the entire thing glowed. Then it exploded.

The blast threw me up and I bounced off the ceiling. That knocked me a little loopy. I fell down through the shards of amber and at my touch they shattered into dust. I tumbled through fire and light to land on a vast, hairy surface.

“Hold tight, manling,” ordered the voice. It was deeper than before. Instead of whispering in my ear, it echoed off the walls and tore at my mind. I lifted my head and found myself staring at a snout at once reptilian and furry, smiling like a crocodile with far more teeth. Its eyes were bright balls of blue-white light with brilliant pupils that burned like the desert sun in a clear blue sky.

“You're a dragon!” I observed articulately.

“Of course!” it gloated.

I glanced over the side and locked eyes with Van, who had stuck just his head out of the vent. We made eye contact, I smiled at him, and as Al-Azhad shot forward scattering flames I gave the prince several obscene gestures. I would have done more, but I needed both hands to hold tight.

That was an experience. The dragon burned from the inside out, and his fur seared me. The strange cloak climbed my arms of its own volition, seeming pulled by the wind yet moving against them. It crept between my fingers, inserting itself into my grasp. That blocked a bit of the heat, enough to let me hold tight. He crashed through sealed doorways, shattering stone and steel with equal casualty. In our wake things caught fire, things that normally wouldn't burn, like rocks. He also had no concern for keeping any consistent orientation. I was just as often clinging upside down, hooking into his burning sides with my heels as riding on the side. His shoulders were only inches broader than my head. If at any point I risked looking up, I saw walls or doorways rushing at my head and immediately ducked back down. I don't know how fast we were moving, but the fiery corona that blazed up around us roared always backwards. It felt like being inside a jet's afterburner.

It also hurt like blazes. Myth's about dragon breath were flat out wrong, because it isn't just the dragon's breath that's on fire, it's the whole dragon. Imagine clutching a red hot frying pan for dear life. In addition, I could feel the faint fingers of the prison's magic reaching for us. The mountain wanted to catch Al-Azhad. My skin burned, blistered, and bled, and only that kept us from being frozen immobile. The wind tried to scour my skin from bone, and shards of rock shot past my skin like bullets.

Without warning, we rocketed out of the caves and traced a brilliant path across the sky. The beast cut a sharp turn and shot straight up into the sky, spinning faster and faster. My hands were gone in a white haze of pain, and finally my hold slipped on the bloody hair. I was torn away. I was suddenly alone in the arctic sky.

“Hey! Help!” I screamed.

Al-Azhad stopped his spinning and cut a tight loop back towards me. He rushed forward until his blinding face was inches from mine as I tumbled through the air.

“Ah, manling. You have my thanks. Now I must be leaving. Places to go and things to do. I wish you the best of luck!” His voice thundered above the roar of the wind.

“Help me down first,” I begged. I was tumbling as I fell and didn't know how high I was. Every second brought me closer to the ground.

The dragon smiled at me. “No,” he replied with a great wink, spun in place and flew off.

Dragons, I decided then, were the assholes of the supernatural world. I hoped Kuranos the First had imprisoned lots of them.

I spread my numb limbs wide and finally stabilized my fall. The very top of Icstath was below me. Even if we had emerged near the peak, in a few seconds we must have climbed thousands of feet. I guess dragons weren't bound by the same laws of nature as the rest of us, but it was a problem none the less.

I was probably going to die from a fall on top of the tallest mountain in the world. It was absurd. There was nothing higher than me to fall from. At least I'd get to finish that full life flashback I'd attempted earlier. There was this time a girl I knew in junior high had kissed me and meant it that I wanted to relive.

I didn't, of course. That wouldn't suck enough. Instead, I screamed at the top of my lungs because it seemed the thing to do and almost relived wetting myself when I crashed face first into the side of the Great Icstath Spire.

Before that I came to a place of incredible winds. They whipped the snow into drifts and drove them about with neither pattern nor system. I dove into a white sea of boiling snow and was sure I was dead. But time was moving slowly. The tenth of a second in the whiteout was enough for me to feel the winds, feel them twist me around, and feel them try to yank my cloak away. It held tight, clinging to my wounds and sucking my blood. In fury at being denied they cast me away, down the mountain. My world was white when unconsciousness took me, so I never knew exactly when I hit.

Small images flutter in and out of my memory of that time; lying in a bed of clouds that sizzled, stars falling onto my skin, black angels reaching down to pull me up and carry me along. For a while the world was a vague, indefinite place.

That receded like a tide from a widening circle of rough worked stone. Reason returned to me slowly. With it came the wind. I sat up, stupefied, as the wind pulled my eyelids open and sucked the moisture from my mouth. I was sure at first I still falling, but there was no sensation of movement. Incredible gale force winds steadily against my body from outside the small circle of my vision.

“So, you survived. Impressive in a way. Here, drink this.”

A silver flask appeared in my field of vision. It was warm to the touch. My head was still spinning and outlines were indistinct. The hand was attached to a forearm, but beyond that was the blur. I drank from the flask.

“Just moonberry juice, I'm afraid. Some cinnamon, a little nutmeg perhaps, but nothing extraordinary is in it. You can finish that, if you want.

I did and did. Moonberries are a small white fruit from the deserts of Kladach and Ob. They're spicy by themselves, and the juice, lightly diluted with water, is a delicacy.

With fluid in my stomach the mists began to recede a little faster. I squinted my eyes against the gale and tried to see who was helping me.

He was not so much seated as perched like a hawk on the edge of stone block. He had black boots and pants, a black vest over a red shirt, and a long black and red silk cloak that hung around him and ignored the wind. Everything he wore stank of money. Like his clothing, his hair was perfectly still in the raging wind. It was combed neatly and cut expertly. The lines of his face were angular. He had been a joy to paint.

“Torin Atkinson?” I asked.

“Indeed, Mr. Harper. I'm so pleased to see you remember me.”

“What are you doing here? Wait, where am I?” I was suddenly unsure and checked around me. I must be back in Phi, having awoken from some bizarre nightmare.

This was not the case.

Below me were the tremendous peaks of the Mons Messina that would dwarf the sky of any other place. A rolling sea of winter storm clouds boiled through the Icstath basin, dropping weather on the demons below. I was on a small flat circle of stone that fell away on three sides. Far below, thousands of feet down, I could see the lines of fortifications of the Seventh Legion. Above me remained only the very peak of Icstath, a fang-like spire that stabbed into the sky. High clouds wafted by in the distance, on an even level with me. The dragon had carried me even higher above the places I'd been before. Now I estimated I stood at about thirty thousand feet up the mountain.

“Mons Icstath, Lee. Where did you think?”

“Then what are you doing here?” I ignored his question to ask my original one again.

“I’ll get to that. Come, let’s get inside.”

He rose with grace. I stumbled to my feet behind him. Ahead of us was a vast cave mouth that opened ominously in the side of the peak. From it came the incredible wind, and into it we went. Torin lifted a burning torch before us, though I couldn’t tell where he took it from. The flame burned steadily, ignoring the wind. Were my cloak and hair not twisted in the fingers of the roaring breeze, I would have started to question my own sanity.

It got worse when I looked down at myself and saw that all my burns were still burning. Tiny tongues of pale white dragon fire licked out of my blisters, mixing with my blood to form red lights that covered my body. My cloak was flaring in the wind, hovering over the wounds like a poised snake. I held up one scorched hand in the wind and waved it to form fire trails. Sparks reached out with the wind, shooting off into the air to die in the snow.

It actually didn’t hurt that much. I lowered my hand and stared, confused, at Torin’s retreating back. He had not noticed. I felt oddly embarrassed about being ablaze and muffled the flames as best I could. Some semblance of normality restored, I hustled after Torin.

“Tell me. Did you climb it?” he asked. He didn’t turn his head to speak, but his words were sucked back to me.

“The Grand Face? Yes,” I yelled. I don’t know how he heard me, but he nodded. “I haven’t summited the peak yet.”

“How did you manage it? Didn’t you need supplies? Oh, and you can speak normally. My hearing is quite good.”

“I thought we would, but Carolyn took care of that.” I considered whether or not I should keep her secrets, but decided I had no loyalty due her left. “She fed me the blood of the earth. That sustained me.”

“The earthblood? You drank it?” Torin stopped walking and turned his head to look at me. I noticed then that his eyes were brilliant in the dark.

“For weeks. I drank so much of it that now my blood’s thick enough with it to break the bonds of Pnakotic orbs. Decent stuff. I can’t remember exactly what it tastes like.” In retrospect, that was probably not the wisest thing to have said. I wasn’t really thinking of Torin, nor the way he stared at me with carnal hunger. My mind flashed back to Carolyn, and what had happened at the end of the climb. I shook my head to free myself of the memories and looked at Torin. His expression was polished ennui. “Why?”

“Just curious,” he lied. I didn’t pick up on it. “So where is Carolyn now?”

“I don’t know or care,” I replied. “At the top of the cliff she betrayed me and tried to kill me. I don’t give a damn about her anymore.”

Torin nodded slowly. “She tried to kill you?”

“Kicked me off the top of the face. I haven't seen her since. For all I know she still thinks I'm dead. I hope so.”

Torin turned back the way we'd been going and started moving again. I kept following blindly.

End Chapter 12