

Chapter 13

Ignorantly following a vampire into the Cathedral of the Old Ones, also known as the Prison Eternal, I told him more or less the entire story since he sat for his head shot in my studio and our recent meeting. I had wanted someone to tell everything to for a while. The need to explain events from my perspective was strong in me. I never remembered to ask why Torin was here so fortuitously nor why he was helping me now. It overpowered the advice Carolyn had given me when we'd left my apartment so long ago. Even when I came to that part of my story I skipped that bit of conversation, so completely had it left my mind. Carolyn had been honest about that, at least. Those questions could have saved my life.

In the halls that we came to, the ceiling rose until it was lost into the gloom above, unlit by the oddly steady light of the torch. Here the wind was powerful and constant, but not the typhoon that resulted when it was funneled into the narrow corridor that we had so recently traversed. The air pressure was astounding. I could feel an unnatural concentration of air pushing it at my skin which just moments ago had been exposed to the vaporous atmosphere of Icstath's peak. The vast basilica-like vault itself was ringed with huge arches of stone that marched in steady progression down into dim obscurity. Torin stopped us here.

“Rest a moment, Lee. Breath. Let yourself recover.”

I did, happily obeying him. Later I would learn that was the first step in dominance. If the victim obeys the will of the vampire, the vampire has an avenue to attack. To me it seemed so innocent.

“Where are we?” I asked. I didn't sit but leaned against one of the buttresses that rose into darkness to support the roof. It reminded me of the one I'd climbed so desperately to escape Van.

“One of the antechambers. Down there,” Torin pointed into the darkness that veiled the continued hall. “Is the true Prison Eternal. That wind you feel is the escaping breath of the Old Ones, borne by their will to flee this place.”

“Given the other people who've been imprisoned here, somehow I doubt they didn't deserve it,” I observed.

“They are ancient and xenolythic forces of unspeakable evil and chaos.”

“I'm so not surprised.”

“Would you like to see them?”

“No, thanks. I'm fine in this non-Old One infested area. Nice decor, good atmosphere, no ancient and whatever forces of bad. Good place. I'll stay.”

“I think you should see them. How often does anyone get the opportunity to view the creators of their world?”

“I have to decline.”

“I insist.” When he said that, Torin turned and looked at me. Again his eyes burned like a tiger's in the

night.

“No,” I replied.

He stared at me, his gaze boring holes into my brain. I couldn't believe he wanted to show me a group of geriatrics so badly. “You must!” he finally snapped. He must have been baffled. His victim had already obeyed him once, but now I was denying his command effortlessly.

“You're starting to make me uncomfortable.”

With a groan he relented. He exhaled as his shoulders drooped and face relaxed.

“Very well.” He sighed. “So much for that.”

I was staring at him suspiciously, considering the distance between me and the doorway. There was nothing out there to run too, of course. Just death by exposure on a mountain top waited outside. But still, I was getting myself ready for something.

Torin diverted my attention expertly. “Tell me, Lee, about Carolyn. You say you were dating her?”

“Sort of,” I replied. “We've never even kissed, and she certainly made no promises, so I shouldn't have expected anything. That being said, expecting to not be kicked off a cliff is a pretty typical dating expectation I've made of lots of people. I didn't know it needed to be stated explicitly.”

“Well, perhaps she wanted to break up with you? That's the term, correct? To 'dump' you? Or is it 'drop' you?”

“As in off a cliff? Then yes, she did that.”

“Well, yes,” he admitted. “But I was thinking more in terms of the relationship. She wanted to end it in a fairly permanent manner.”

“Murder is about as permanent as you get,” I agreed.

“You'd be surprised,” he said to himself, too quiet for me to hear. “But still, I'm sorry.”

“Thanks,” I replied with a fair bit of sarcasm and acid. “I hadn't realized that a simple 'dear john' letter wasn't enough. She had to resort to homicide. You make it sound so reasonable.”

“Attempted homicide,” he was quick to point out.

“Of course. That's so much better.”

Torin must have realized he was losing me. He tried one last, desperate gamble before I started ignoring him. “Do you want her back?”

“What?” My voice was flat and bitter.

“Carolyn. Do you want her back?”

“Of course, jackass. She dropped me. If I didn't want her back, I would have dumped her. Though falling to her death wouldn't have been involved.”

“Are you going to-”

I cut him off. “Listen, I don't know why you're here, what you're doing, or why you happened to be in a perfect position to help me in to go see you old guy buddies, but I don't care. I think I've heard quite enough out of you.”

“Lee, please let me explain.”

“No.”

He said something else, but I started making inarticulate noises and drowned out whatever he had to say with meaningless babble. That rankled him. Irritation broke through his nice-guy exterior and he yelled at me. I gave him a series of sexually explicit instructions that were neither dignified or biologically possible, unless he was much more flexible than a normal man. Gumby couldn't put that there without straining.

“Lee! Enough of this. Would you like to know why she did it?”

“Let me guess. You two were going to get back together. She decided that she liked guys who talk too much after all.”

There was a blur of movement and something hit me in the guts. I sailed away from the wall, hit the ground and rolled end over end, and started coughing up blood. Another flash and Torin slammed my head down underneath his foot. His heel dropped onto my throat, stopping my breathing. My lungs, empty from the strike, screamed for air.

“Little mortal fool, you will listen to me now. She killed you to keep you from me. In a moment you'll be dead. I'll have your blood, the blood that climbed the Grand Face and conquered the power of Icstath, and all the might of the earthblood will be in me. Then I'll make this shallow puppet a true power, kill that bastard Kuranee, and kill your little woman too. You should have died to prevent this, and now you died for nothing.”

That made no sense at all. It didn't matter. I was holding his calf, thrashing and yanking, trying to move his foot, but it was useless. All the muscle that had dragged me up the mountain side was futile against him. I tried to strike the vital areas of his leg as I'd been taught, but it was like punching wood. Torin reached down, grabbed me by the throat, and yanked me aloft until I hung from my neck, feet kicking him in the chest and groin. Nothing phased him. His eyes were on my throat. His thumb squeezed my jugular veins. Suddenly I could feel my pulse in my temple. Everything began to go red.

With his free hand he drew a bastard sword from his cloak. I hadn't seen it a moment before. He shook me so hard that my head snapped back, and I saw stars. I was so dazed I stopped thrashing. He ran the blade through my chest.

Words cannot describe how much that hurt.

“Die, Lee,” Torin said and leaned forward. His teeth were brilliant white and long as needles. I grabbed his face with one hand still sizzling with dragon fire and tried to push him away. It was like an ant fighting god. He bit directly into my neck.

Blood spewed from my throat, hit the fire on my hand, and erupted into flame. Torin Atkinson, mouth positioned to suck my blood, caught the full burst of bloody flame down the throat. It screamed like an acetylene torch and lit a brilliant glow in his throat and chest. I smiled suddenly. It was a nasty, vicious smile. All the brokenhearted hope to give it at some time or another. It's the smile of pleasure that comes from rage, hatred, and fury executed upon a worthy target. Carolyn had made me very unhappy. Torin was the perfect person to take it out on.

I grabbed his head with both my arms and clenched, holding him in tight. I felt rivers of heat running through his body. Vampires have no digestive tract, and their throat leads directly to their cold hearts, so my burning blood rushed through his veins, scorching his body and incinerating him from the inside out. He let go of me with both hands to try to pull away.

“Oh, is this not what you wanted?” I demanded with my first breath. He struggled in my grip, but already the internal fire was blasting apart his form and robbing him of his infernal strength. “This isn't what you had in mind? Drink, Torin. Drink!”

I wrapped my legs around him, locking them around his chest. Now my whole body was bent around his head, and the two blazing wounds, my neck and chest, were searing holes in him. Fire erupted out of his back and engulfed us both. We became one in a diabolical union of hatred.

He stumbled around the antechamber to the vast cathedral, trying to pull me off while the strength left him. It fled us both. Finally I too began to lose my grip. We fell apart, both still cocooned in flames that erupted from our wounds.

“Didn't think this one through, did you?” I gurgled. I couldn't lay on my back for some reason. It took me a while to realize it was because the bastard's sword was still running entirely through my chest. “Didn't realize I wasn't that weak?”

“I want that strength,” Torin replied. He was twitching in a pool of blood, black ichor, and pale fire. Even his clothing was sizzling. He was breathing in gasps, sucking wind as the fires smoldered.

“Oh, so this is what you wanted.” I smiled that smile again. I could roll onto my hands and knees, and crawl that way. The hilt of the blade passed just above the floor. I went to him, climbed through the dying flames, and lay with my side on his chest, immobilizing him. “Then this is what you're getting. Enjoy.”

Maybe I was losing my mind from blood loss or too caught up in my anger to think clearly. I doubt it. My mind was unnaturally lucid as I stared down at Torin. Lessons from childhood stories and the historic myths of Phi came back to me. You couldn't leave a vampire to die from his wounds. You need a coup d'etat. Torin had to be finished. He was struggling to push me away. I think he knew what was about to happen.

I yanked the sword out of my guts and stabbed it into his. I made sure I hit his heart.

He screamed once and convulsed. Something yanked him upright, dragging him upwards by the chest

as his arms and legs dangled like a useless puppet. I held on, and we ascended. My own blood flowed out of his heart down the sword and mixed with mine, caught fire, and the flames raced back up. The blaze flashed to incredible brilliance, and something snapped. The invisible puppet master's strings roared like an inferno. Everything went white.

End Chapter 13