

Chapter 2

Two days later I pounded on a thick fire door like the police. When it finally opened, Jessica saw it was me and yanked it wide.

“Lee! You didn't tell me you were dating Queen Kuranos the Seventh!”

“Jessica! You didn't tell *me* I was dating Queen Kuranos the Seventh!”

“Dude!” she yelled.

“Chick!” I shouted back.

We stared at each other for a few seconds at a conversational impasse. Jessica, in case you didn't guess, was the friend of mine I'd told you about before. She was real into the royal family and followed all the gossip, drama, and sordid events of that august lineage. I was extremely mad at her for omitting that little bit of information I was so incredibly curious about, and she was mighty irritated at me for the same.

Ultimately I pushed passed her and went into her kitchen. She slammed the door shut behind me and followed me. Her apartment was much nicer than mine, and her kitchen was its own little room. I made a bee line for her alcohol cabinet and rifled through it.

“Pour two glasses of that,” she finally ordered.

I did. I drank them both, then poured another two and handed her one. Jessica considered this, then took the bottle from me, and added to her glass until she had quite the advantage of me. She sipped it and made a face, because she forgot she doesn't like liquor. I drank mine, swapped glasses, and we sat down across from each other in the living room.

“So?” she demanded, popping some gum into her mouth to get rid of the aftertaste.

“I took her climbing like we planned, right?”

“Go on.”

“I'm going, I'm going. Hold on.”

“I'm not holding nothing! You're committing adultery with oldest living member of the royal family. You think we have time for patience?”

“I never even kissed her!” I protested.

“Doesn't matter. Kuranos the Eleventh had a man executed for being alone in a room with his wife for nine minutes. They were both fully clothed the entire time. And that was four Kuranos later. They got *less* strict as time went by.”

“He did what?” I said, aghast.

“Executed him,” she replied, and drew a line across her neck with her forefinger. Then she also drew lines across her shoulders, her thighs, her ears, nose, a suspicious one over where nothing should have been on her crotch, and then redrew the line across her throat. My eyes bugged out of my head, and I took another deep sip. Jessica nodded earnestly. “And I’m leaving out the bad parts.”

“What bad parts?”

“The real bad parts.”

“What bad parts?” I yelled.

She told me.

I finished my drink and almost fainted.

“Just for being alone with her in a room. Fully clad. Nine minutes.”

“How do they know it was nine minutes?”

“The guard who ran down to get a chaperon went from the second room of the east tower to the chapel and back. They put a guard in the same uniform and timed him a few years ago. Some historians wanted to check a theory.”

“How do you know this?” I asked, suddenly.

“Trashy magazines. Duh!” she retorted.

“That’s a load of crap,” I snorted.

“It was confirmed in Dysman’s Complete History of the Royal Family, volume eleven, page four hundred and three, paragraph two.” Jessica reached underneath the chair she was perched on and produced said volume, opened it to the applicable page and handed it to me. She’d clearly been doing this today, because this morning’s newspaper clippings were her bookmark. I scanned the highlighted lines and blanched. Then I noticed my face plastered across the newspaper clippings and blanched again. I wanted to take another deep sip of my drink because the first four hadn’t kicked in yet. I had the impression that if I took a strong drink every time I had a bad surprise today, I might die of alcohol poisoning by lunch. Besides, I had finished it a few seconds ago.

“So?” she demanded.

“So what?”

“What happened on your date?”

“It wasn’t really a date,” I started to explain.

“Did you want to kiss her?”

“But I didn’t,” I denied.

“But you wanted to,” she pounced on my words.

“But I didn't,” I reiterated.

“Doesn't matter. Still counts.”

“You're killing me, Jess.”

“No, the axemen are going to kill you,” she said seriously. We both winced in unison. “Sorry.”

“Please, don't do that again.”

We looked at each other in silence. I had to get my blood pressure under control, and she felt embarrassed at her outburst. This time she waited until I was ready.

I skimmed the events of the day until we got to the point where Carolyn announced what was written on the coffin.

“Right after that, while I was still trying to figure out what was going on, she turned to face the sky and said really loudly, 'Ludus, come here. Now.' I was about to tell her that she's crazy when she started dropping bombs on me. It went like this:

'Lee Harper,' she said. 'Do you remember when I told you my name was Carolyn White?'

'Uh, yes,' I replied.

'That's true, because now that's the closest translation of my name in the modern tongue of Phi. Literally it's Casstrianix Cris, Cris meaning white, in the old language of the High Vold Alliance.'

I replied, 'The who, the what?'

'The High Vold Alliance. The people that lived on the Islands of Vold before they sank into the sea.'

Now, you were the history buff, not me, but I remember something vaguely about the Vold islands, the first thing being that they sank about a billion years ago. I mentioned this to her.

'Eleven hundred and forty seven years,' Carolyn corrected me. 'I remember for that was the first time I met my husband, Kuran the Seventh.'"

“Oh, that's got to be a kick in the ass,” observed Jessica.

“Shut up, you're interrupting me.”

“Still, I hope I look that good when I'm that old.”

“When you're a thousand years old the worms that eat you when I strangle you for interrupting me will be dead and gone.”

“Jeez. You're real tense, you know that?”

“Jessica-” I warned her.

“I'm just saying. And she's eleven hundred and seventy. Queen Kuranos the Seventh was twenty three when she fled the sinking isles and met Kuranos.”

“Would you stop calling her that?”

“What?”

“Queen Kuranos. She does have her own name, you know.”

“Yes, but do you realize that you using it, being an adult male not related to her by blood, is punishable by death?”

“Says who?” I demanded.

“Dysman's Complete History of the Royal Family, volume-”

“You know, I don't really care,” I stopped her. “I've already got eight or nine death sentences racked up.”

“More than that,” she said. She leaned forward, pulled another thick volume of the aforementioned series from beneath her chair and opened it to another bookmarked page. I took it away from her and glanced at the page myself, but that glance scared me and I threw the book over my shoulder, aiming for the window. I missed, hit a wall, it landed on the cat, and the little fur ball shrieked at me and ran off. For some reason, that made me feel better. I think was the alcohol.

“Would you like the rest of the story, or do you want to keep getting distracted by my impending death sentences?”

“I promise to be good.”

“Good. Now I stopped following the thread of conversation when she mentions that part about the husband, Kuranos the Seventh. She goes on to explain the whole business. How she and he met, he took her back here, married her in royal ceremony, and how the assassin who's-his-but-”

“Desian the Terror.”

“Shut up.”

“I'm just helping!”

“You promised to shut up!”

“No, I promised to be good. And I'm really bad at promises.”

“Fine. Desian the Terror. Shut up.”

“Hmpf.”

“Desian the Terror showed up in the middle of the night and started stabbing people before the royal couple had time to go off and have their wedding night.”

“That's got to be a kick in the ass, too.”

“Actually, I'm rather okay with it.”

“Well, you would be. But think of the bride and groom!”

“I am thinking of the bride and groom! Well, the bride at any rate.”

“Why do you keep going off on tangents? Finish the story.”

“Jess, I'm already on death row. They can't very well do anything worse to me if I take you with me.”

“The story!” she insisted.

“Fine! Anyway, you know, why am I even telling you this? You know all the details about it better than I do anyway. I barely understood the story when Carolyn, and dammit I'm going to keep calling her that, told me the first time. Suffice to say, Kuranos swore revenge before he consummated his marriage and swore that nothing, not even death, would stop him from consummating his marriage.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“Personally, I'd have the wedding night, and then go on my killing spree,” Jessica mused.

“Tell me about it. Backwards priorities, eh?”

“Yeah. Especially with a little hotty like her. If I was Kuranos the Seventh, I'd be one that like white on rice.”

“Hey!”

“What? Don't you agree?”

“Of course I do. But you're a chick.”

“Yeah. And?”

“She's a chick.”

“Did you find out for sure?”

I ignored that. “And you're not a lesbian!”

"I'm not saying I would. I'm saying I figured Kuranos the Seventh would. Hell, we know you would."

"Well, Kuranos the Seventh was a lunatic. Swore revenge, wandered off, never came back. And since apparently he made this oath on the true throne of Phi, as true ordained king, the power of the throne made it true. So Carolyn has been around all this time. For a while she had a public presence, but she cut that out right quick. From what I gather, so long as she lives, no king of Phi is the true king of Phi, and that's why to sit on the throne is death. The other kings of Phi aren't terribly fond of this, which is why they tried to disappear her a few times."

"More than that. Apparently Kuranos the Eighteenth sent seventy eight assassins after her."

"Bastard."

"He was, actually."

"Really?"

"Yup."

"Good."

"So she lives a quiet life of seclusion," Jessica took over the story. She knew all this better than me anyway. "Supported by the Royal Family all down through the ages, kept alive by elder magic and undying love."

I decided to strangle her then. Jessica, not Carolyn.

"You know- Wait. If you know all this, how come you didn't recognize the picture of her I showed you?"

"Hello! Quiet life of seclusion." she snorted.

"Thanks. Thanks awfully."

"Sorry. Anyway, down through the ages until, ironically, you and her are minding your own business when you stumble across a coffin containing her dead husband."

"And the bastard can't even stay dead!"

"He isn't a bastard. The Seventh is legit."

"What?"

"He's legit. I checked."

I snorted. "Anyway, while the cops had me in an interrogation cell, someone comes in and tells me that some enterprising jackass stuck a stethoscope to the coffin, and they can hear the old goat's heart beat through the walls. Lost for a millenia, stuck in a coffin, buried at sea, and he can't even die."

“Such a beautiful story,” Jessica said. I snapped my head up scowl at her, and saw she was getting all misty eyed.

“You say one word about undying love, and so help me I'm going to deserve all those things they're going to do to me.”

“Don't worry. I like you more than Kuranos the Seventh anyway.”

“Good. Thank you.”

“Besides, you're an epic hero, ready to die for unrequited love-”

I threw a pillow at her.

I really wasn't in the mood to have any kind of serious discussion, but Jessica would not let the topic drop. Finally I locked myself in her guest bathroom and tried to get my mind working. Instead I just contemplated the fact that she had a guest bathroom in her apartment. Life was so unfair.

Eventually she yelled something about breakfast through the door. This seemed like a very good idea, and I joined her in the kitchen. She made me waffles.

“Hey, look at this,” she interjected, interrupting my waffle eating. I followed the line of her finger to the TV.

Carolyn's face, or at least a publicity shot of it, was taking up half the screen. On the other half was the Crystal Tower. That royal building, the tower that the palace had been built around, was somewhere on the order of a thousand feet tall, made of blocks of silver and crystal, and had stood in solitary dignity above the city from time immemorial. Legend had it it had risen from the sea with the island, fully built and simply awaiting occupants.

The anchorwoman was giving a voice over, “...Which means that she, apparently the bereaved widow, but actually simply a newlywed awaiting the return of her long lost husband, has been residing with the royal family since the time of her husband's disappearance, over eleven hundred years ago. Amazingly, she was the one to find her lost husband.”

“I know all that,” I snorted.

Jessica, who had been paying attention while I ate, summarized the program. “They've been repeating it over and over. I don't think anyone knows anything interesting, so they're just reiterating that. But you need to wait, there's a doctor Philius Van Marius who's should be on any minute. He's giving the Mage's Guild official statement on the affair.”

“We have a Mage's Guild?” I asked.

“Yeah. Blows your mind, eh?” Jessica replied with a impressed smile.

“Is that like the mafia?”

“I think so. Maybe they drive around the city, whacking people who pull rabbits out of hats without proper licensing.”

“You mean disappearing them?”

“Shush. He's on.”

We both turned back to the TV. There was a stately, well dressed gentlemen with a few dignified streaks of gray hair. He answered a few questions in a deep, resonant voice. “In short, Rebbeca,” That was the anchor woman's name, “at this point we have begun exploring the item. While it is, of course, too early to release a definitive statement, right now our results are in good concurrence with those of the ultrasound crews. It is very likely that someone, possibly Kuranos the Seventh himself, is alive within the sarcophagus.”

From there the TV switched to the ultrasound images in question. While Rebbeca explained them I followed the details. I was forced to admit, they did look a lot like a figure, heavily swaddled in cloth. Four of these images followed each other in rapid succession, revealing that the figure seemed to be breathing slowly, like he was asleep.

“My boyfriend's back, and you're gonna be in trouble,” Jessica hummed softly.

“Ho. Ly. Shit.” I announced.

“Kuranos the Seventh. Also known as Kuranos the Vengeful.”

“Now you're just messing with me.”

“Swear to Rhys,” Jessica made a circle over her heart, in the traditional gesture of that faith. It didn't surprise me that she was a follower of the goddess of success. She was certainly doing well for herself. “He was known as one of the most bitter and vindictive kings of old, worse even than Kuranos the Third who released Warlord Dread with the only command, 'Make them suffer.' Besides, he skipped his wedding night to go hunt down Desian the Terror.”

My stomach dropped out. I remembered something from high school of Kuranos the Vengeful, and what I remembered was not good. I had not put two and two together until now, but I really disliked what it added up to.

My phone rang.

“Hello,” I answered it vacantly.

“Lee. We need to talk.” It was Carolyn. “I'm coming to see you.”

“I'm not at my apartment,” I started.

“I know exactly where you are. I'll be there in seven minutes.” She hung up.

Jessica was looking at me.

“Jess, you know how you always told me you wanted to meet royalty? Well, I'm about to be such a nice guy.”

The gum dropped out of Jessica's mouth. “She's coming here?”

“In the royal flesh.”

Jessica looked around her apartment in a panic. Fortunately, she was one of those people who always keep their living quarters presentable, so nothing was out of place. She looked up at me.

“Lee, you lead the most exciting life ever.”

I had no idea how to respond to that. “In seven minutes it's going to get better.”

Carolyn arrived in four. There was an authoritative knock on Jessica's door. She barely had time to get it open before Queen Kuranos the Seventh stormed past her and into the living room.

She stopped a few feet from me. For the first time since I'd known her, she wasn't wearing black. Instead, she had nondescript pants and a sweater in gray and brown. Unfortunately, it made her look more normal and accessible. She was the island of reality in this sudden storm of events. I wanted her so badly my chest seized up. Instead I asked, “Do I need to bow or something?”

“No. When have you ever needed to bow to me?”

“Always, from what I hear. I just haven't been doing it because you forgot to tell me you're the ordained Queen of Phi.”

Carolyn sighed. I had no idea how bitter my voice was, but I wanted to take my words back.

“Oh, excuse me,” Jessica said in the periphery. “You must be Ludus.”

I seized the distraction and turned. Ludus had come in and was shaking hands gravely with Jessica. She shut the door behind him, and moved towards the two of us hesitantly.

I turned back to face the queen. “Carolyn, what are we going to do?”

“I have no idea,” she replied. She sounded exhausted. “But we have to figure that out very quickly.”

“Please, your majesty, have a seat,” Jessica indicated the couch.

Carolyn turned to her and replied seriously, “Thank you. Call me ma'am. That's the wisest choice.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

Carolyn sat down, and I sat next to her. Jessica raised an eyebrow, but I ignored her.

“I'm sorry,” I told the queen.

“So am I.” She sighed. “Well, Lee, you picked an interesting spot for an afternoon.”

“We should have gone to Don's.”

“Indeed,” Suddenly she startled like a rabbit and rose to her feet. “My dear, I'm terribly sorry,” she addressed Jessica. “My name is Carolyn White, Queen Kuranos et cetera, et cetera. I very pleased to meet you.” She offered her hand.

“Jessica Thomas, ma'am. You how no idea how excited I am to talk to you.” She took Carolyn's hand, but I could tell she didn't know whether to shake it, or kiss it and genuflect. Carolyn simplified the affair by taking Jessica's hand in both of hers, shaking it firmly and respectfully, and letting go. “Is there anything I can get you?”

“Something to drink, please. Water would be perfect.”

“Yes, ma'am. Ludus?”

Ludus shook his head silently and waved her off. He was standing in the corner, out of the way but with a good view of the room.

“Lee?”

“Water too, thanks.”

“Sure thing.”

When Jessica returned, Carolyn took the glass from her, thanked her again, and indicated she should sit across from us. They took their seats in unison.

“Well, at least your 'take charge' attitude now makes sense,” I started.

“It comes with the territory.”

“What's new at the palace? As relating to the guy we found in the coffin,” I clarified.

“He's alive. He seems to be asleep. From what we can tell, his heartbeat is strong and his breathing is regular. Some doctors are trying to figure out how to attach an EKG machine to the coffin but have not had any success when I left. The coffin itself is hermetically sealed. There are no air holes, doors, or methods of entry of any kind. The mages are waiting patiently for their chance to examine the thing.”

“The mages?”

“Yeah. We have almost a dozen court sorcerers.”

I blurted out, “You're really a thousand years old?”

Carolyn nodded. “A little over eleven hundred.”

“I'm sorry. I was kind of vaguely aware magic existed, but thought it was like vast criminal conspiracies. Good material for movies, but not really real.”

Carolyn looked at me calmly. “Would you like a demonstration?”

“What do you mean?”

“Magic. Would you like a demonstration?”

“Yes,” I replied excitedly.

“Here.” She shut her eyes and took a few deep breathes. I was holding my own breath, and I think Jessica was too. Carolyn opened her eyes, smiled at me, and exhaled slowly. “There.”

“What?” I yelled. I didn't feel different, and I quickly glanced over my clothes. They all looked the same. Then I glanced at Jessica, while she was doing the same to me. We made eye contact, I shrugged, and she shook her head confused. We turned back to Carolyn. “Well?”

“I'm a thousand years old and still breathing. Magic.”

I stared at her. Jessica groaned with annoyance. Carolyn smirked at us, sipped her water, and settled back into her seat.

“Weak,” I judged.

“Don't be so sure. I know people who would spend millions to have that.”

“Whatever. I thought you were going to show me something impressive.”

“Something impressive, eh?”

“Yeah.”

“Like mind control?”

I thought about it for a few seconds. “Yeah. But not hypnosis, or any of that.”

“Very well. I promise without hypnotizing you I can make you obey my every command.”

Carolyn stood up and moved so she was standing alone in the middle of the floor. While she was clearing some space with her foot she asked, “Lee, come here please.”

Obediently I rose and walked over. She pointed at a footstool next to her, and I pushed it against the wall.

“Are you ready?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then stand on my right so Jessica can watch.”

I did. She looked behind me and noticed I was directly in front of the TV.

“Actually, move over here to my left.”

I did.

“Close your eyes, and take a deep breath.”

My head was beating a mile a minute. I couldn't wait for something to happen. I couldn't see them, but I was straining my ears and intensely ready.

“See. Mind control,” she told Jessica. I could hear the smirk in her voice. I waited for a second, not quite ready to move, but then the two women both exploded into laughter. I cracked one eye.

The two of them were standing side by side, grinning impishly, and looking very entertained with themselves. I stared at them expectantly. “Well?”

“Impressive, wouldn't you say?” Carolyn asked Jessica.

“Oh, very. The most amazing part is he doesn't remember any of it,” she replied smugly.

“What?” I demanded.

“Mind control,” they told me in unison and cracked up laughing again.

When I finally figured out what they were laughing about, I felt tremendously let down. I stared at Carolyn, smirking at me, and sighed. “Oh.”

“Don't be sullen, Lee. Come here. Have a seat.” Carolyn sat back where she had before and patted the couch beside her.

“Let me guess. Mind control,” I replied in a deadpan.

I think Jessica nearly choked to death with all the giggling and chortling.

“Am I going to be able to get a straight answer out of you?” I asked, frustrated.

“Lee, being a magician is a bit like being a mechanic. I know how to change a tire, but I doubt I could claim to be a automotive repair specialist. Similarly, I haven't taken the licensing test at the Mage's Guild, nor have I gone through the school.” Carolyn explained this to me slowly, like she was speaking to a child.

“But you know magic?”

“Like mind control?” She arched one eyebrow.

“Could you pull a rabbit out of a hat?”

“Not without her license, she couldn't,” Jessica retorted.

“Yes, actually. But first I'd need a rabbit. And a hat.” Carolyn ignored the two of us while we were laughing.

“Here,” I handed her a large cowboy hat Jessica kept on her bookshelves. “I think it's still loaded.”

She took it from me and put it on the table in front of her. “Lee, while this is fun, unfortunately this isn't why I'm here. We don't have much time, and we need to get back to business.” She was still relaxed, but I could tell she had returned to her serious tone.

There was nothing to decide, of course. We went over the particulars of the matter for a while, but that just depressed her and scared me. Eventually we said goodbye and left. I had walked here so Carolyn drove me home.

We faced each other on my doorstep, a modest four feet apart. Ludus had emerged from the vehicle and was now in plain sight down the hallway. He seemed to be fascinated with rearranging his credit cards.

“Tomorrow the assorted doctors, CSI teams, magicians, and a couple of simple lunatics are going to brief the family on what they've managed to ascertain about the coffin. Would you like to attend?”

“Do you think that's wise? Should you and I be seen together, at the palace no less?”

“Lee, if you do come, you and I will probably not get within twenty feet of each other unless the etiquette patrol insists I have a receiving line. I am going to be stuck on the dais with the royals. Besides which, it barely matters anyway. At this point we're both damned if problems arrive anyway.”

“That seems kind of absurd.”

Carolyn sighed and gave me a long look that was hard to read. “Lee, you have no idea. Hope and pray you never meet Kuranos the Seventh. Hope that it isn't him inside the coffin. Or at the very least hope his millenia long nap has mellowed him out somewhat.”

You don't sound terribly fond of the guy, I thought. Darn. Out loud I said, “Then I'd like to come tomorrow. Then at least I'd know what's going on.”

“Good. I'll have a car sent around for you at about nine.”

“I'll be ready.”

“Good.” She paused, like she wanted to say more but changed her mind. “Do you remember what we spoke about in Stephano's?”

“Yes. What in particular?”

“You told me you had a problem when I invited you to someplace and you arrived looking like a poor relation. I'm not going to be able to protect you tomorrow. Go to Masterpiece Thread on the corner of Fifth and Fisherman. Tell them exactly where you're going. They won't let you down.”

I nodded. “I'll go at once.”

“Good. Good bye, Lee.”

“Later, Carolyn.”

The predicament I was getting myself into became even more muddled as I considered it while two tailors measured and taped me. While I'm not terribly religious, I do consider the sacrament of matrimony to be a very serious thing. I was sort of, almost having an affair with a married woman, and that's not something I was terribly proud of. On the other hand, the simple absurd details of the situation were conflicting within me. She'd been abandoned the day of her wedding and left alone for millenia. Back in the old days when Phi had profited almost solely on shipping, you were considered dead if no one saw you for a couple years. The argument could go either way.

There was a play I had seen for a theater class about just that. Some ship captain had vanished at sea and after waiting a respectful nine years his presumed widow had remarried. The captain returned and been quite unhappy with that turn of events. It had never been worked out in the courts because the captain had killed everybody while they slept then set the house on fire. What worried me was that seemed to be Kuran's the Seventh's style.

End Chapter 2

Chapter 3

If you want to feel like you've done something with your life, visit the royal palace. If you want to feel like royalty, have one of the royal cars pick you up at your door. If you want to feel like you're hallucinating wildly, have Prince and Heir Apparent Claudius drive you.