

Part 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.

“Morning,” he greeted me when I answered the bell.

“Morning,” I replied. Then I pulled a double take and wondered if I needed to start bowing. Claudius stepped into the room past me, slapped my shoulder companionably, and took stock of the place. He was early, but I'd been up since before dawn, sketching to pass the time. A large gentleman who bore a distinct resemblance to Ludus came in behind him.

“Cadian Rourke,” he said, and we shook hands. With a sense of *deja vu* he squeezed my hand tightly, and gave me the same approving smile when I won the game. He followed Claudius in, carefully surveyed the room, and then took a sentinel's position by the wall. I glanced into the hallway, but saw only the neighbor's cat. I shut the door and returned to my guests.

“I'm the prince Claudius, and all that. You are Lee Harper. Introductions done. Fix your tie.”

“Are all of you nobles like that? So curt?”

“Gods, no. Just me and my aunt Carolyn. That's why we get along so well. Nope, with anyone else we'd barely have begun saying hello, Cadian would still be searching the apartment for weapons, and by the time we got past the pleasantries we'd be saying goodbye as I dropped you off at the palace.”

“Your aunt Carolyn?”

Claudius looked a little older than me. He was about my height but better built. He had very short red hair, green eyes, and royal features. I guess with his bloodline he could look like someone hit him in the face with a shovel and still have royal features, but that was not the case. I'd seen his picture on a thousand magazine covers and news programs, but they failed to convey the relaxed posture and mundane way of looking at things.

“Aunt C, I call her. I've known her since I was born and had to call her something. You're making a mess of your tie. Mind if I help?”

“No. Please.”

“Thanks,” he replied and got to work on that infernal device about my throat. It seems he had reversed the usual role of gratitude, but he kept talking while he worked and I didn't have time to think about it. “Since you're probably wondering, I'm here officially to extend the gratitude of the royal family for you finding the sarcophagus containing that dear dead old goat. You are my guest, not Aunt C's, and so we should say hello before I turn you loose into that snake pit. You do not, in fact, know Aunt C terribly well, but you think she's a wonderful person. With me so far?”

“Yes.”

“Lee, we take this very seriously. The seventh was a decent king, but a real bastard of a person. If that

is his royal corpse still sucking wind in that box, he's probably going to be real irritable when he wakes up and no one's really sure what he's capable of. If he starts trying to hack people apart or, Morpheus forbid, wants the throne every thing's going to get very dicey in the old city." With a flourish Claudius cinched the knot tight around my throat. He brushed my shoulders off, straightened my collar, and refolded my pocket handkerchief. "Now, when we get to the palace there's going to be someone watching us the whole time. Most of the watchers will be mundane, servants who sign contracts with gossip mags or the official paparazzi. Try to ignore them, smile when you can't, and for the love of Trys watch your table manners if you eat. No one should know too much about you, and we intend to keep it that way."

Claudius spoke quickly and very clearly. His enunciation was impeccable, but the intensity of his voice made it seem like he was pouring information into me with a fire hose. "It's possible someone slightly less harmless might approach you. If someone does start asking you questions, especially about you and Aunt C, tell them the truth. You did some painting for her, always in a tasteful and modest fashion, and she paid you promptly. You took her rock climbing once. Don't get talkative. Still with me?"

"Yes," I replied.

"I've seen the paintings, by the way. Good stuff." Claudius stepped back and looked me over with a critical eye.

"Thank you."

"Your welcome. Grab anything you need and we'll hit the road. I recommend you take a camera. Most people who come to the palace for the first time seem to like pictures of everything."

That seemed like a good idea. I keep a camera kit together in case I need to take snapshots for reference later, so it was easy to bring that along. As soon as I indicated we could leave Claudius was out the door and leading me to his car.

The drive to the palace was fast and a blur of lights. We went around the side, entered a subterranean garage, and parked in a vast cavern like structure made of naked concrete and steel. There were several armored cars, some small civilian cars, and three main battle tanks, all nicely parked by a couple of motorcycles and a street bike. In the corner were a line of racing bicycles. Carolyn's Illusion sat discretely between us and the armored cars.

"Welcome to the east garage. This is where his type parks," Claudius stabbed a thumb at the silent Cadian as we climbed out of the car.

"His type?"

"Shadows. Royal bodyguards. Whatever you want to call them. By the way, Cadian is going to be following you around while you're here. He should be able to keep you out of trouble. Just keep your eyes open, mouth shut, and you'll be fine."

"Where will you be?"

"Off doing royal stuff. Waste of time, unfortunately." He lead me across a monolithic expanse of empty asphalt, devoid of anything but great pillars twenty feet thick. When we passed through a pair of

hardened glass doors two inches thick, a short foyer, and then another set of glass blast doors we were in a small lobby with elevators off to the side. “Anyway, good luck to you.” He clapped my shoulder again, pushed me into an elevator, and waved. The doors shut with a hiss.

The Crystal Tower is a beautiful place. It's been around for close to two thousand years according to the legends, as I've mentioned before, and most of that time has been occupied by various individuals filling it either every manner of gorgeous artwork, lavishly decorated room, or stupifyingly amazing relic of such historical significance I could barely breath standing in the same room. It is also a hundred and nine stories tall and doesn't have an elevator. The dust got real thick right about the time we hit the thirtieth floor. On floor forty three I started wondering if I really had to be at this function after all, and on floor sixty three I stopped caring about works of incalculable beauty I'd studied in art school. I sat down on a patio by a window, and considered the city for a while. It didn't take me nearly as long to descend to the ground floor and return to the palace. With that out of my system, I found the briefing room and waited for it to begin.

Eventually people started arriving. A couple gentlemen in black suits with dark glasses and earpieces escorted me outside the room while it was cleared and privately searched me. I was allowed to keep my camera but warned against flash photography. Shortly thereafter the scientists, doctors, and probably wizards started arrived. I played a little game where I tried to tell them apart. A tech crew set up a couple computers and projectors. More people drifted in.

Eventually Claudius showed up. He walked about the room, talking to just about everyone. When he came to me we shook hands again, exchanged some pleasantries I don't remember, and smiled for the cameras. Carolyn arrived shortly thereafter, but she was surrounded by a mass of humanity so deep I barely glimpsed her. She took a seat next to Claudius.

“His Majesty, Kuranos, King of Phi!” boomed an announcer.

Like everyone else I rose then genuflected. Kuranos the Seventy Third was a thin man of middling years. He met his son in the center of the room, and the two of them made the rounds again.

“You majesty, Lee Harper. Mr Harper, His majesty,” Claudius introduced us when it was my turn.

“I'm honored to meet you,” I told him.

“Thank you. I've heard a lot about you,” he replied. We clasped hands in what I expected to be a diplomatic handshake. “One thing I've heard is that you have a good, strong grip,” he continued. I suddenly realized what was about to happen even as it did.

The King squeezed my hand and bent it into a ball like Play Doh. Claudius grinned then nodded at me and said, very quietly, “Go ahead.”

I looked at him like he was crazy.

“Come on,” invited my monarch.

Oh well, what the hell, I decided and cranked back.

As he had mentioned, I have a pretty good grip. The king, who looked about fifty, proceeded to give me

the best run for my money I've ever had. He was smiling, amused, and so was I as we strained for a few seconds. At first he had the advantage over me, but when I bent myself against it I pressed back until it was about even. By this point I was breathing slowly, forcing myself not to pant, and the muscles in my forearms knotted until I thought my sleeves would burst. Kuranos burst out laughing.

"I'm not disappointed. Mr Harper, it's a pleasure to meet you." He let go of my hand. "Please, be welcome in my house."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"Good lad, this one. Take care of him," he told Claudius, who murmured his assent. They moved off down the line.

I was confused and amazed. The king hadn't even showed any signs of exertion. Where the veins were bulging out on my hand and wrist, his were subdued and showed no signs of effort. It didn't seem possible.

Shortly after that the presentations began.

First a stuffy scientist, one Dr Krous, a Noninvasive Probing expert from my alma mater, presented his findings. He had sonograms, x-rays, CAT scans, MRIs, and a string of alphabet soup that corresponded to pictures I steadily understood less and less until I wondered if he was having a religious experience and was speaking in tongues. He was succeeded by a physicist who was very entertaining, but I understood nothing of what he explained.

Next was Philius Van Marius, the spokesman from the mages guild I'd seen on TV previously. He was even more dignified and charismatic in person. Van Marius began, "The sarcophagus itself is a veritable cornucopia of magical energy. Upon deciphering the first level on encryption, a hazardous process that was the cause of the explosion yesterday, we ascertained that this artifice was constructed by a master. In addition, it is extremely heavily protected from external tampering. While we have avoided taking actions towards defeating the rune structure emplaced within, our initial analysis of that which is without implies these were constructed by an expert in the field of warding commonly used by certain fringe groups in the eras of Kuranos the Sixth through the Ninth. These fringe groups never had much of a presence in Celephas, nor in any of the lands of Phi, but were very common in the north. It was long suspected they were the source of Bizet's stone ship phenomena, that plagued our ancestors during this time.

"The purpose of the rune structure seems to coincide perfectly with the observations made by my illustrious comrades." Van Marius regally nodded his head to the two scientists who had preceded him. "Whoever is in that coffin is alive. His needs for air and nourishment are being suspended instead of met. The rune structure, what you might consider a 'spell,'" he pronounced the word with mildly patronizing amusement, "is acquiring its power from an unknown source, but channels it through the planets Osinius and Ram. Osinius and Ram are invisible to the naked eye, as you all know, below altitudes of twenty five thousand feet. Since this energy could not be focused through a telescope, that means that the initial casting of the spell would have to be at more than that altitude. After consulting with the preeminent Dr Cobbler, the evidence points to any of the following possibilities."

I sat up and began to take notice. Van Marius was already the most interesting of the presenters, and while I wasn't terribly concerned about the history, the mention of twenty five thousand plus feet grew

fascinating.

“The first is this artifact was created in the time of Kuranos the Seventh, in accordance with the nomenclature engraved on the lid. It was created at one of the few places in the known world with an altitude that supersedes this height. The stars would have had to have been visible at the time the runes were engraved, which means that both the coffin's occupant and the coffin would have come together at that time, at some place with the requisite height. The forces necessary to make such an effort possible are staggering.

“The second is that this was created an unknown amount of time more recently. Within the last fifty years, science has developed artificial environments capable of withstanding the extreme climate necessary. The sarcophagus would then have been immediately moved to the sea and immersed. This is possible, but directly contradicts the impressive work done by Dr Krouse with carbon dating techniques.

“The third is that the magic within the sarcophagus is so sophisticated that it defies everything we have been able to learn. In this case I cannot make any conclusions.

“I am now prepared to answer any questions you might have.”

I blinked a few times. A thousand questions sprang to mind.

“Dr Van Marius,” began the king. He was seated on a comfortable chair on the left side of the building. It was depressingly non-throne like. “Where are these few places where such an event is possible?”

“Of the known mountain peaks that exceed the required elevation, all of the explored summits are in the Hescorpi range in Nirmo. There are a total of seventeen.” Dr Marius paused and almost invisibly braced himself with a deep breath. “The rest are exclusively within the Mons Messina.”

“The Mountains of Madness?” Kuranos replied. Suppressed smiles raced through the crowd and a few hushed chuckles slipped through the crowd.

“Yes, sire. Where Desian the Terror fled after assaulting the wedding of Kuranos the Seventh, and where Kuranos himself followed,” replied the doctor. He turned to Carolyn and asked, “Correct, your majesty?”

“Yes,” she replied quietly.

“Were it created more recently, where would it be possible to do such a thing?” the king asked, quickly diverting the topic from that line of conversation.

“Sire, any of the Hescorpi mountains would provide a plausible location. All of the great peaks of that range have been successfully ascended before.”

The king asked him a few more questions about the mountains, then returned to the topic of the coffin itself and the magic that protected it. I didn't pay too much attention because having been born and raised in Nirmo, I was familiar enough with everything there that the discussion bored me. I perked up a bit when the discussion returned to the coffin, but it was the same kind of discussion that the other scientists had had. Everyone else seemed to follow the thread of it, so I frowned attentively and spaced out.

Unfortunately, I didn't space back in until the briefing was done. I tried when the next presenter rose, a woman with wispy white hair and wise eyes. When she started talking about barnacle growth I was gone. After that it was done. For an hour or so I sat and considered what Van Marius had implied, kings and covens of sorcerers on forbidden mountain tops in strange place. The Mons Messina were like Utopia to climbers. The twenty tallest surveyed peaks in the world were there, none of which had ever been successfully summited. Others had not even been successfully surveyed by plane.

None of them had ever been measured from the surface, of course.

When everything broke up later, I mingled around, trying to get closer to the magician. I was almost to him when someone, a wiry little bastard, asked about the Mountains of Madness in an instigating tone, and whether Marius intended to propose an expedition there. Marius looked slightly ill. He demurred softly and retreated from the room. I never had a chance to ask the exact same question.

Eventually, I moved into the hallway. Cadian tapped me on the shoulder and lead me to a side room, where a buffet was laid out. The food was amazing. I realized I had to come to more of these events.

The rest of the crowd meandered in and began talking about things I didn't understand. I fell into a circle of men discussing politics and tried to look attentive. After a few minutes of that I was so bored I couldn't stand and politely withdrew. I glanced over my shoulder at Cadian.

“Cadian, how do you talk to these people? Everything I have to say sounds retarded.”

“A fool and sage say the same thing with their mouths shut.”

Cadian seemed to have a lot more going on in his head than I had expected. Good advice is good advice, so I took it and nodded to him. Cadian nodded back, just as seriously and silently as Ludus always was. Then he tapped my shoulder and indicated Carolyn, who was leaving in a crowd of suits wearing thousand dollar shoes. He indicated a side door. “Are you ready to leave?”

“Yes,” I replied. “There's nothing else for me to do here.”

Cadian escorted me to a different car, a black sedan. He held the rear door open for me, and then drove me home.

Along the way I called Jessica, “Hey, just letting you know that I've just returned from the palace. It's a nice place. You should visit some time.”

“I hate you,” she replied.

“Why? I'm just saying its a nice place.”

She hung up on me.

A few minutes later she called me back, and I told her every gory detail. By the time I was done I was home.

My apartment was just as I had left it. I stared at the naked wiring in the ceiling, the bare floorboards,

and the rust creeping along the metal in the kitchen. My room felt very small.

But, as I'd mentioned a while ago, it was getting on towards the winter holidays, and business was picking up. My clothes, which I removed and carefully hung up, had eaten up most of Carolyn's most recent payment. I had one other commission to be done, a portrait of a small dog that had never sat still long enough to be sketched. Some mildly wealthy widow had wanted it. With a resigned sigh I began sketching an outline. I set my phone on the counter, where I could easily answer it if anyone called. No one did.

By evening I had made good progress. I stared for a few seconds at my work. It would be ghastly when it was finished, but the old lady would love it. I knew that instinctually. Old people are crazy about their pets. I washed up and went to sleep.

My building has, among other defects, shoddy plumbing. About midnight I arose and stumbled into the bathroom to find out the water to my apartment had gone out again. Grumbling, I put on clothing and went three doors down to the blasting music of my neighbors. I knocked a few times, and they let me in.

"Bathroom?" I asked.

"Bathroom," they agreed. Amazingly, they weren't in the midst of a session. My neighbors were very devout worshipers of Morpheus, God of Dreams, and enjoyed all that entailed. By that I mean recreational chemicals known to enhance one's dreams. By that I mean they smoked the ganja in staggering quantities. "Hungry?"

"No. Bathroom."

"Suit yourself."

I stayed for a bit, cracking jokes and had a beer, but left when they brought out the glass bongs. I wasn't really in the mood.

When I returned to my room I noticed I'd left the door ajar. I swore a bit under my breath. I listened but didn't hear anything, so I barged into my apartment. The lights came on and flickered.

Two men climbing out the window with my TV while a third held the window open. The one with his hands free had a large pistol that he used to wave around the room, pointing at other things they should steal. He froze in the act of this as we considered each other. I had a perfect view of all three of their faces.

"Sorry, mate. Bad timing," he said.

"No kidding," I replied.

He raised the gun and leveled it at me.

I wish I had smoked with the rest. Then I could blame my paralysis on that. When you live in my neighborhood, you get a gun drawn on you sooner or later, but until then I'd always been lucky. I'd planned for this, considered what I'd do. I'd even run simulations in the wee sleepless hours of the

morning for just such an occasion. Now that it was on me I realized that I had absolutely no idea what to do next. I certainly couldn't dodge a bullet. Was it worth trying anyway? It seemed absurd, really. Kuran the Seventh was going to kill me, not three idiot robbers.

The thug shot me.

That is, he tried to shoot me. Instead he missed and hit the ceiling, because someone had knocked his arm up.

I saw his face in the muzzle flash. The burglar's knit hat was pulled low over his face, but Ludus I could see perfectly. His skin was orange, and his eyes reflected the white light of gunpowder like an angel's. The gunshot missed, and then Ludus got his great hands on the intruder.

In the dark I saw him scientifically murder three men. Starlight illuminated the room, turning everything black and white. He shattered skulls, broke necks, and stove in ribs, destroying their bodies with medicinal attention to detail. It was as inevitable as the rising tide but shockingly fast. Fittingly, it happened in deathly silence. First the intruders' lost their wind, then their voices, and when Ludus deemed the last act finished and his final victim dropped into a limp boneless heap, they weren't even corpses. They were bags of skin and bone fragments. There was no blood.

“Lee, wake up,” Carolyn snapped.

“Who are you?” I stared at the huge man who had said so very little all this time.

“It doesn't matter. Lee, are you hurt?” Carolyn interrupted again, moving to me.

“No. No, I'm fine.”

“Ludus, clean the room. Lee, look at me. Lee.”

Ludus went into action again like a machine. He stripped a sheet from my bed and began rolling them into it. He never blinked. Carolyn had to physically grab my face and turn me to face her. She was so very close.

“Lee,” she said, very softly. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes,” I murmured. Why was she acting so funny? It was like she didn't think I was listening over the deep thrum. The one sound I could hear in the background was a single bass tone, vibrating through my skin and bones, but already fading as the work in the midnight was vanishing. I felt it slipping away as I began to notice her fingers on my face and her eyes on mine. It was hard to think.

“Good. We need to go. Right now. Do you understand?”

“No, not really,” I admitted.

“Will you trust me on this one?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Get up. We need to go, right now.”

She took my hand and pulled. I stood up following her lead and let her lead me like a child out the door and down a flight of stairs. She was very careful not to touch anything, the door, the wall, the banister, and I did so as well.

Outside the Illusion sat in the alleyway. It melted into the shadows. Until she opened my door and pushed me in I wasn't entirely sure what was going on. The inside was familiar. It smelled like pine trees and leather.

Carolyn climbed in the driver's seat and started the car. It purred, barely above a whisper, and we slipped onto the street and away into the night.

“That was my fault. I'm sorry,” she told me. She was biting her lip, driving absently while the gears in her head turned over. Her eyes were locked on the road.

“Why?”

“I underestimated them. The last twenty successions have been so peaceful that I forgot how vicious they can be. I also underestimated their time line. I thought we had years yet.”

“Successions?”

“Royal successions. Who's going to be Kuran's the Seventy Fourth. By nature the events are savage, bloody affairs.”

Understanding was coming to me in glimpses and fragments. “I thought Claudius was the heir?”

“He is. Until he dies.”

“They're going to kill him?” I wasn't terribly sure who 'they' were.

“Not if I have anything to do with it,” Carolyn snapped.

We were making good time towards the south. Apartment buildings were giving way to vast industrial plants and low rows of warehouses. I seldom came here.

“Who are they?” I have a lot of problems playing obscure word games.

“The people who tried to kill you.”

“And who is that?”

“I have no idea.”

“They seem pretty intent,” I observed, fishing for information. A warm tingling feeling had begun moving towards my head from my fingers and toes. It felt good.

“It would seem so. If anyone's playing by the old rules, that means that they have to kill or control quite

a number of people. All the royal family, of course. Myself included.”

“Doesn't that seem a bit paranoid?”

“Lee, fratricide has killed more Kuranés than cancer. Murder has killed more members of the royal family than all natural illnesses combined. It's very discretely hidden in the history books, and as I said, the last twenty or so have been surprisingly peaceful. This one won't be.”

“But how do you know this is in any way connected to that?”

“Lee, I've been around for a little while. I've got instincts about this sort of thing.”

“Ah.” The tingling sensation had reached my hips and shoulders. I looked down and saw my fingers twitching in my lap, like they were typing. My feet were drumming on the cushioned floorboards.

“Basically, it's too much of a coincidence. Three adept murderers break into your apartment the night after you first come to the palace. Only a buffoon or a lawyer wouldn't know you're connected to me, and my first mistake was bringing you to the palace at all, letting anyone see how important you are. They might think they can influence me, or they might want to scare me. It might be something worse.”

My ears were beginning to tingle. I couldn't hear everything she said, and couldn't focus on what I did here. I tried to talk. “How do you know they weren't just burglars? I do live in a pretty shitty part of town.”

“Impossible. Ludus would never have that much trouble with burglars.”

“Trouble?” I could still distinctly remember the fight, and I didn't remember Ludus having any problems at all.

“Lots. He had to kill them. He should have taken at least one alive.”

While Celephas never truly sleeps, it gets pretty torpid between midnight and dawn in the industrial district. Some factories run all the time and a few cars putter quietly about the streets, but we had the streets mostly to ourselves. Even more strangely, we had the car to ourselves. I'd never been alone with Carolyn while we drove before. I mentioned this.

“Enjoy it. We'll be running for a while, now.”

“Running where?”

“Not to where. Away from where, more specifically here. Wonder why I was so fortuitously present in your time of need?”

“No, not really. I hadn't gotten there yet.”

“Start paying attention to those questions, Lee. They could save your life.”

“Fine. Why were you so fortuitously present in my time of need?”

“About an hour previously someone tried to kill me.”

I got pretty upset at that idea.

“Are you all right?” I demanded.

“I’m fine. They tried to run me off the road while I was driving back from a meeting with Philius Van Marius. They missed, and I raced away. They didn’t give chase after that, because it couldn’t be covered up to be an accident.”

I looked over at her. She seemed calm, almost flippant. I remembered from Jessica that this had happened to her many times before. That also seriously bothered me.

“How did you escape?”

We’d stopped for an intersection and Carolyn turned to face me. She was grinning wryly. “Magic.”

“No, seriously.”

“I’m being serious.”

“Really?”

“No.”

“Then how did you do it?”

“I told you. Magic.”

“You said it wasn’t!”

“No, I didn’t.”

“Yes, you did. You said magic, I said really, and you said no.”

“I know. I never say yes when someone asks me ‘really?’ It confuses people.”

I stared at Carolyn. She met my gaze until the light changed then turned back to the road, her expression level. This didn’t surprise me. It was a very Carolyn thing to do.

“So, it actually was magic?”

“Yes,” she replied. She looked mildly annoyed that I kept asking the same question over again.

“Really?” I asked, mostly to annoy her more.

“No,” she replied, annoyed more, and drove on.

I watched Carolyn as she drove, trying to intentionally see the details of her face and expression like it

was the first time we'd met. Her hair remained a uniform shade of black whether passing lights cast fluttering beams on her face or the deeper shadows wrapped around her like a scarf. Her eyes were very deep brown. Sometimes neon lights gave them wild colors, and for a moment they glowed with brilliant red or blue, totally artificial and strangely hypnotic. The very tip of her nose was turned up, typical of some young women, and her lips looked soft. Other than her incredible control, she seemed so young it was hard for me to reconcile her with the legends.

Not that I really cared, but, "So where are we going?"

"The south side docks. There's a safe house I have there. You'll be staying there until Ludus cleans your house and disposes of the evidence."

"Why don't we just call the police?"

"Because that would tell whoever sent the assassins after you too much. Bodies can be autopsied, and my name might be brought into it. The whole thing reeks of public scandal. We'll sweep this quietly under the rug for now."

"Who's Ludus?" I asked.

"My bodyguard." she looked at me curiously.

"No, I mean personally. I saw him rip three men apart. They had guns and probably knives. Who is he?"

"You've never heard of the organization I recruited him from. He doesn't win medals from the government. But no one questions him when he carries weapons on a plane or into government buildings. Ludus is utterly reliable, and possibly the only man I trust."

"The only?"

She looked at me out of the corner of her eye. "Possibly." She was smiling, like we might have a secret joke between the two of us.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"And what are you going to do about it?" she asked, testing me. She did that a lot.

"Well, since I'm not going to fight it out, I'll have to think of something I can do to earn your trust."

"Like what? Slay a dragon for me?"

"No, probably not. I think I'll leave dragon slaying to Ludus. He could probably handle it. But if you need any rocks climbed, let me know. Also, portraits painted and dress codes violated."

"Rocks climbed, eh?"

"Oh, yeah," I laughed. "You name it. I'll climb it."

"Mt Icestath." She said it so seriously I stopped dead, mid-chuckle. I turned my head to face her very slowly.

"What do you mean?"

"Mt Icestath. It's where Desian fled to and where Kuranos chased him down with half his army."

"I know. It's also the tallest mountain in the world. It's never been summited."

"Want to try?" We'd stopped at another light, and she turned to face me. Her eyes were a challenge, like a spider inviting a fly into her parlor. An evil, excited smile lurked on her delicate lips.

"The heart of the Mons Messina?"

"The heart and soul."

"I would love to," I replied. The tingling feeling crested and began to fade.

"Good," she replied, and the trap slammed shut.

End part 3