

Part 4

When she pulled up to the old, dirty docks on the south side she parked in a small garage. We got out and locked it up behind us. I started towards the building, but she caught my arm.

“We won't be going to the safe house after all. If we're going, we should go now.”

I blinked. Leave for the Mons Messina right now? Without packing or gathering my belongings? Do I really want to do this, I asked the silences of my mind.

Hell yeah, they replied.

“Sure. Lead the way,” I told her.

We moved through alleys and side streets to the water front. After scaling a rusty fence we hid behind some dumpsters as a security guard wandered passed. Then it was down a narrow sluice way to a small private dock. Recalling the expensive Illusion she drove and the staggering opulence of the palace, I glanced about, looking for the magnificent yacht.

“It's that one,” she whispered.

That one was certainly not a magnificent yacht. It was a floating deathtrap that stank worse than the polluted water or the factory exhaust. It stank at range. It stank almost visibly.

I glanced at Carolyn, glanced at the boat jalopy, and sighed. Nothing ever worked out the way I expected.

“Go get the boat,” she whispered again, and pointed. A dim figure dressed in thugged out chains was standing on the dock, rocking on his heels. “Be careful about the guard.”

“How am I going to get past the guard?”

“Here. Use this.” She handed me a rock.

“What is it?” I asked.

“A rock,” she replied.

“No, I mean-” I stopped, exasperated. “Is it a special rock?”

“Yes. It's magic. It casts 'sleep' on its target. Hit him in the head to activate its power.”

“Thanks so much,” I deadpanned. “Does it do mind control too?”

“Sure. Tell him to do what you want or you'll cast sleep.”

“Wait, why am I doing this? You're a thousand years old. Don't you know tiger dragon claw style martial arts?”

“What is tiger dragon claw style?”

“Whatever!” I replied.

“You mean, why didn't I spend the all my life not living, only practicing kung fu so I could hurt people?”

“Exactly.”

“Gee, I don't know.”

“I don't either. You could have been bad ass.”

“Lee, get the boat.” Now she was exasperated.

We scowled at each other and I crept down to the water. The pier was only fifty feet away so I swam there beneath the surface, careful not to make any bubbles. The water was filthy. I shimmied up a pylon and slid over the side. The guard, not terribly alert, was smoking and staring off into space.

I cast 'sleep' on him.

“What happened?” Carolyn asked when I returned.

“I hit him with the rock.”

“See? Worked, didn't it.”

I sighed. “Come along, Carolyn.”

We scurried down the pier and over the side of the dilapidated hulk. When passing the guard I dumped him into a trash can. His snores echoed out, and someone would find him soon.

We cast off and swung away from the row of docks. There was barely enough current to pull us along. With poles and boat hooks I shoved us past the other floating detritus that mired each side of the channel. Before we hit the bay the fog that comes from the hot water runoff from the factories swallowed us up. All we had were the buoys dull bells.

“So, Cap'n, where too?” I asked when we were moving.

“First we pick up supplies. Then straight to the Mons.”

“Nirmo, then?”

“Can we get everything we need there?” she asked me seriously.

“Easily. It'll be expensive, though.”

Carolyn didn't respond. Instead, she flashed a black credit card, then fanned it to reveal four more. She had a royal flush of money.

"I love dating a rich girl," I observed.

"We are not dating," she told me.

"What are we doing?"

"Running for our lives."

"We certainly aren't running very fast," I replied, archly.

"We're taking the subtle approach." With that she started the ancient diesel motor. It coughed for a while, then turned over with an exhausted wheeze. Finally it settled into a soft grumbling punctuated by erratic spurts of noise.

I rolled my eyes.

"But you're right. We aren't moving very fast," she relented. "Go stick your head over the side and see how fast we are moving. Watch a log or something."

"No logs," I replied. "But I do see a dead rat floating by."

"Fine. How fast do you think we're going?"

"The rat is passing us."

Carolyn pursed her lips. "Hmm," she declared.

"Don't worry. We should be at least a mile from shore by morning," I reassured her dryly.

"I'd like to be a good distance away before that thug wakes up," my not-girlfriend replied.

"That may not be for a while," I murmured.

"What? Why?"

"I hit him pretty hard."

Carolyn did not reply immediately. When she did she spoke very carefully. "Why?"

"I don't have much use for the Chads."

"The who?"

"The Chads. The gang he was part of. He had a yellow bandanna around his neck. That's their color. He also had a teardrop tattooed behind his ear. That means he's killed somebody."

"Ah," she replied delicately.

“But they'll be after us soon enough,” I changed the subject. “We can't outrun much in this.”

“Actually, we can,” she contradicted me. “All we need is moonlight.”

“How?”

“Magic,” she responded. “Honest, real, no-trickery magic. There. Does that make you happy?”

“Yes.” I thought for a moment. “Yes, it does.” I smiled a self-satisfied smile.

We crept along forever. My watch said forty seven minutes, but I thought that was a filthy lie. The erratic putt of the motor was the only sound in the fog.

Eventually, the fog began to clear. The moon came out. I surveyed our ship. It would be the nautical equivalent of my apartment, only it slanted worse. Outrunning anything, even another dead rat, would be magic. The first rays of moonlight bathed us.

“Death the Dragon, Simon's friend, bear me now to Kuran's end,” she intoned. Immediately, a cloud covered the moon, plunging us back into darkness.

“Carolyn, I'm scared,” I said suddenly. “Let me hold your hand.”

“That's not my hand,” she replied acidly.

“Are you sure?” I squeezed a couple times. “I'm not scared any more.”

“Oh, you should be,” she told me in a voice like death.

The cloud passed. The first rays of light caught the fore deck, and the whole ship burst into brilliant light. The deck, and now sails and rigging, glowed with a radiant white light. It dimmed after a few seconds to a warm incandescence that lit the vessel in its own starlight. The ship was longer, more elegant. The smokestack was replaced with two soaring masts, with sails fully set. No longer did the decks consist of rusty sheet metal. Everything was albino wood the shade of molten silver. The gunwales, the hatches, and even the helm were intricately carved with bizarre designs whose meaning tore at the limits of my consciousness but did not spring to mind. The only thing I recognized were the two wings that folded at either side, giving the ship the aspect of a hunting hawk. I stumbled forward a few steps, open mouthed.

“We're riding the White Ship of Celephias, Lee,” Carolyn said softly. “We'll make good time now.”

I stared about the deck for a long moment, then turned and gave Carolyn a sincere smile. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” she replied gravely.

I went forward until I stood at the bow and stayed there as small waves broke against the keel. Soon we were free of the mist. Alone under a starlit sky, we seemed to be parted from every plane and other ship from Phi's great harbors and ports.

Eventually I returned to Carolyn's side. She stood behind the wheel, seeming lost in thought, but my

return was not unnoticed. Soon she asked me, “Lee, why do care so much about magic?”

“Because it's-” Magic, I was about to say, as if that explained everything in and of itself. I stopped myself and reconsidered. There was a more thorough answer. “I live in a fantasy world. I have to. I'm an artist, and the only reason people want paintings instead of photographs is I can add something to the real world. I can take something boring and make it more, just by adding a bit to the image. I can paint the warmth of a family much easier than a camera can capture it. My entire job, the thing I love about art, is that I can go a bit beyond the world of what is, and show a bit of what can be, or what almost is, or what should have been.

“You're like a distillation of that. You're royal, which is a magic we normal people never see to begin with. You're a thousand years old and know people who are just history lessons to me. But even before that, you're so far from the normal world that sometimes I'm amazed you obey the laws of gravity. Nothing you do matches up with the world I'm stuck in, but everything matches up with the world I work in. You live in my fantasy world. And when real magic happens, real magic that I can see, it makes me feel like I can be there with you.”

That had gotten severely out of hand. I realized as the last words left my lips that I'd probably crossed some fundamental boundary between what I should have said and what I did. I was terribly afraid again, because she said we weren't dating and I just spoken to her like we were.

Carolyn looked at me sagely. She never lost her calm or betrayed any reaction. Instead, she reached out, took one of my hands, and put it on the helms man's wheel. “Here. She's yours for the moment. You can steer.”

I shifted and stepped so I could grasp it with both hands. Intricate trceries sent surprisingly complicated sensory impressions through my fingertips. Carolyn moved back so we weren't touching, but left on hand lightly on the wheel beside mine.

“Keep to your course,” she said softly. “We'll be fine.”

I won't bore you with the details. We made amazing time to Phados De, a little city on Nirmo's coast. It takes four hours by plane. We arrived the next day. Phados De is the gateway to the highlands of Nirmo's interior, full of outdoors outfitters. With effectively unlimited funds I purchased everything that the four of us would need.

Four because late in the afternoon the day we arrived Ludus and Cadian appeared. They walked into a store without saying anything and began bagging my purchases like it was the most natural thing in the world. We trooped back to the ship.

“Glad to see you, gentlemen,” Carolyn greeted us when we boarded. Ludus, help me with the stowage. Cadian, you stick with Lee.”

I glanced at Cadian, who acknowledged me with a nod. I shrugged. His appearance was another thing that didn't surprise me in the least. Besides, if the local fauna at the Mons Messina lived up to its reputation we would need them. Two days later we set sail again.

End Chapter 1, Carolyn