

Chapter 5

Sailing is fun. The first day out of Nirmo was full of excitement. There were ropes, knots, sails, sheets, big metal things that did stuff, and water. There was lots of water.

There wasn't much to do, however. Carolyn was locked behind the wheel. She taught me the basics of navigation, but said she couldn't leave the wheel to let me practice. With the two men-at-arms on the deck, we were hesitant to get overly comfortable. I set up an easel and did some sketches of the ship while we talked.

I also did a quick study of Carolyn behind the wheel. I worked on that till the light changed, and then set it aside for morning. With nothing else to do I started one of the others while they worked out on the deck below.

Those two intimidated me, and I was relieved to see them work out like normal men. They did push-ups, sit-ups, and hours of other mundane exercises. They did a lot more of each than I could but nothing supernatural. After the sun passed by over head and began setting before us, I was forced to set that work aside as well. I grumbled about this to Carolyn.

“Watch,” she encouraged me. “I imagine they're going to start combat training, and that's pretty exciting to see.”

It was.

First they went through a brutal series of drills, critiquing each other and executing moves up and down the main deck. They simulated guns, knives, and broken bottles, and practiced both with and against the weapon. When sparring began it wasn't the insane, no holds barred death matches I'd expected. Instead, one would pick a technique and the other would practice innumerable counters and ripostes until it seemed that every conceivable combination of moves was tested. Then they switched. This went on for hours.

“Man, that looks fun,” I observed.

“Go join them,” Carolyn suggested.

“Are you kidding? I'd be murdered.”

“I doubt that.”

Ludus missed with a block and took a foot to the face. Cadian's heel cracked against his forehead and lifted him an inch off the deck. His body crashed into the main mast, shaking the sails and rigging above with a rattle like dry bones.

“Woman, are you trying to get me killed?” I asked archly.

Ludus laughed, rubbed his forehead, and stood up. The two of them discussed the exchange in low tones before squaring off again.

“See? He's fine.”

“He's also been through 'surviving death' training, I bet. I'm not so lucky. Nor do I think the ability to survive normally fatal injuries to the head parts necessary to prepare to summit Icstath.”

Carolyn shrugged. “Fine, but I think you'd enjoy it.”

We watched another flurry of movement. “You may be right,” I admitted. “But I don't want to make them stop, just to do the basics with me.”

“Wait until they go on to sword fighting,” she suggested. “Less chance of injury anyway.”

“Except the whole bleeding thing,” I retorted.

“Lee, they aren't going to train you with real swords. You'll be fine.”

“Carolyn, they're beating each other with two by fours.”

“Are they bleeding?”

“Do they have blunt trauma?”

“I tell you what. Start with sword fighting, and then try some marksmanship. Both will be useful skills where we're going. I'll order them to be nice, if you want.”

“I don't need you to protect me.”

“Then stop being a wimp and go ask. You'll enjoy it.”

I snorted at her but let myself be persuaded.

I admit it. She was right. They put me through one hell of a workout, but I learned a lot. They were both extremely proficient in a fast, brutal style of combat that was ugly to watch. Instruction was also ugly, but I gathered it would be very effective. There was surprisingly little parrying, and a lot of killing the other guy as fast as possible. They warned me an experienced sword fighter would cut me to ribbons, but with work I might survive long enough to get away. When we were done my legs were in agony. Shooting was similar. They made me do an hour of drills before allowing me to use any real bullets. That evening I slept exhausted.

In time we came to the Mons Messina. One morning I awoke to see them looming above the clouds, gray and indistinct on the horizon. Dawn's early light had barely struck the mast, but illuminated the peaks before us.

“Beautiful, aren't they?” Carolyn asked from the pilot's deck behind me. “I love the way they rise out of the sea.”

I looked back at her. On this trip she seemed to have stopped sleeping entirely, never leaving the wheel except for minor breaks to eat and drink. But she didn't look tired. Instead her eyes had a peculiar longing for the peaks ahead. The wind came from behind her, catching her cloak and hair and whipping

them forward. Black in the dim light, her hair lashed over her shoulders like it was straining forward as well.

“Very beautiful,” I replied. I don't think she caught the meaning of that as I stared at her. I liked the way there was so much going on in her eyes. I could see wheels driving purposes in her mind. “And dangerous.”

“They can be,” she admitted, assuring me she missed my point. I let it ride. “They march to the edges of the Norad Contagaian. Past the coast they get even taller than what you see.”

They grew all day. With a strong wind behind us I noticed them beginning to loom, but didn't gain any real sense of perspective till a swarm of clouds we were chasing hit the side of the peaks about halfway up. The clouds butted against them before draining through some of the lower passes. By afternoon Carolyn began furling the sails, and we edged forward. Isolated standing stones detached from the gray stone blur and stood like sentinels as we came in. Many of them stood between us and the distant mountains. The waves were very still and beat against the foot of the tall plinths.

Carolyn sidled us up to one and had Cadian take a sounding. Forty fathoms, he reported. I did some mental calculations and realized I had no idea what a fathom is.

“Six feet,” she told me when I asked.

“That's pretty deep,” I decided.

“Considering we're only a few miles from shore, yes, it is,” she agreed. “We'll anchor here and run in the morning. I don't want to run out of light around here.”

I considered this. I was sitting on the railing across from the immense obelisk and looked up at it. It was like a needle poking a hundred feet up into the air. The very tip looked blunt. It must be about three hundred feet tall, underwater parts included I decided. Lichen and bits of moss encrusted the lower part where tall waves could reach, but above that was naked rock scoured clean by the wind and rain. There seemed to be no traces of birds on top, which surprised me.

“Impressive, isn't it?” Carolyn asked.

“Very.”

“We used to call them watchers, but I don't know what they're called now. The sailors where I was from thought they were gods of the waters. They considered them good luck.” She paused. “You should paint one.”

“I will,” I agreed. I got up and walked past her to sit on the other railing, facing out towards the watcher. The stone was polished by the sea this low. A small fracture ran up the side, the only real feature for the first twenty or so feet. That disappeared just above where the lichens stopped, but there the surface roughened up. I followed the crack up with my eyes. It was so close I could almost touch it. “Gods, were they?”

“Yes. It will be your first image of the-” she broke off at the splash. I couldn't hear her, of course, since I was underwater and swimming for the rock, but she was always a practical one and wouldn't waste

her breath.

“Lee! What are you doing?” She yelled at me when I stuck my head out of the water.

I didn't answer. I came up for air, grabbed the crack, and pulled myself up hand over hand until my feet cleared the water. By leaning way off to the right, I followed the crack up, careful not to touch the lichen. There were two distinct types, one of which had numerous pointy parts, but fortunately neither of these was as prevalent as they had appeared. In a couple seconds I was past their height.

The stone was even more pitted than I had imagined. Big, deep cracks lined side of it. My bare feet were wet, but the route was easy. The rock was sun-warmed, and I dried quickly. Before I started paying attention to what Carolyn was yelling at me she had stopped.

After a couple minutes I glanced over my shoulder and saw I was level with the crow's nest. Cadian was watching me expressionlessly. I grinned at him and continued up.

The top was rounded like a bald head. When I came over the side and sat down to rest, I realized I could lie down with arms and legs spread wide. There were no bird droppings at all, and the clean rock felt warm underneath me. It would be a great place for a catnap, provided I didn't roll over in my sleep. That would be bad.

“Hey, down there!” I yelled when I had my breath back. Carolyn had joined Cadian in the lookout's perch.

“Comfortable?” she yelled to me.

“Very! That was fun.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. Have you given any thought to how you're going to get down?”

“Jump,” I replied. The water was certainly deep enough.

“I wouldn't recommend that.”

“Why? It should be deep enough. All you have to do is hit feet first, right?”

“Oh, I'm sure it is. It just that these waters are infested with carnivorous fish.”

“They're what!?”

“They're dormant during the day. At night they come out. Some have evolved little claws so they can climb. That's why birds don't nest up there.”

“But they're dormant during the day, right?”

“Unless someone wakes them up by splashing around in the water.”

“I see,” I replied. “Are you playing a prank on me? Meat eating fish that climb seems pretty ridiculous.”

“Oh, don't worry. You'll see much worse in the mountains. This is just a taste.”

“Cadian, is she joking with me?”

Cadian shook his head very seriously. Cadian had never struck me as much of a joker.

“Really?” I asked.

“No,” she replied. “You'll be fine. Try it and find out.”

To be honest, Carolyn had never struck me as much of a joker either.

“What do you suggest?” I asked.

“Just wait. We'll throw you a rope.”

I did, and they did. Cadian tied a weight to the end of it, spun it for a while, and hurled it up to me. It was a pretty long shot, but he was a beast. I considered tying a harness and jumping. That works a lot in the movies, but at best I was probably going to get vasectomy. I was rather fond of those parts. After a while I found a place to tie the rope to and climbed down.

“That was fun,” I explained when I was back on the deck.

Carolyn gave me a flat look. “At least we have more than enough rope to spare,” she finally said.

I shrugged. I was here to climb. What did she expect me to do?

We lowered sail and moved off. Before night fell she pulled us to another halt. “If we, and by we I mean you, can agree to avoid climbing any of the scenery, we'll stay here for the night.” She looked at me suspiciously.

I pretended to be hurt. With an air of injured dignity I replied, “Are we clear of the biting fish?”

“No. But they won't climb this ship unless someone advertises the presence of an easy meal.”

“Why?”

“White Ship of Celephias, Lee. Magic.”

“Oh, right.” That was cool. “Sweet. Can we at least pull up to another god? I've got a new canvas and some great ideas.”

“If you promise to behave yourself.”

“I can't believe you would even imply I wouldn't,” I sniffed and looked down my nose at her. We were about the same height, so I had to tilt my head up to do it. The look she gave me told me she was having none of it. “Besides, it's almost dark, and I hate climbing at night.”

“Very well,” she relented. By evening I had penciled out what I wanted. Carolyn stood in the foreground, hair streaming behind her like we were still underway. The immense watcher loomed up behind her, but I was using similar shades to imply they had the same permanence. The primary contrast was the phallic nature of the plinth and Carolyn's femininity.

She came over after dinner and sat on the rail behind me, watching over my shoulder. “But we're not moving now,” she observed.

“Artistic license,” I replied.

“Ah.”

“The problem is I can't take them with us.” I indicated my other work with my hand, the ones drying on the deck and metaphorically the five I had in a stack below. It had been a very productive trip for me so far. “I don't know what the sea air will do to them.”

“We can stop in Baiglor, if you want. It's the only civilized city of any size on this continent and should have an air freight station at least. You can ship them back to Phi.”

“Good idea,” I told her. “I'll send them to Jessica.”

“The girl I met just after the climbing trip?”

“Yep. Her. She's a trustworthy sort. She'll store them for me until I get back.” I explained further after comparing my work and the subject. “Her boyfriend is a-” I searched for a diplomatic way to say pretentious prick. “art critic. He'll know how to take care of them.”

“You don't sound fond of him,” she said dryly.

“They met at a show I had. They hit it right off. He went home to write a pretty scathing review of me.”

“And you're trusting him to take care of this?”

“No, I'm trusting her.” I smirked up at her. “Unlike you, I trust lots of people. Besides, Jessica takes care of this kind of thing for a living. She's some kind of attorney.”

“Foolishness,” Carolyn decided.

“Yes. Foolishness. Wouldn't it be terrible if I went off and acted without thinking, perhaps getting myself into some kind of ridiculous adventure?” My smirk deepened.

Carolyn rolled her eyes. She stood up and walked past me, pausing to squeeze my shoulder as she went.

Two days later we made port at Baiglor. It was a dirty sprawling city that grew cancerously out from the harbor to envelope the nearby foothills. The vast mountains the rose behind it overshadowed the city in the afternoon light when we arrived. Several small rivers ran down from the white capped peaks and dumped into the sea here, forming the harbor in their delta. Oddly enough, our ship had been an ugly yacht since I woke up the day before. No one acted surprised.

“Why don't you and Cadian go out and find an air freighter. Ludus and I will refill our provisions.”

“You can take Cadian if you want.”

“I'd rather none of us go off alone. There are seedy elements here. Someone might see you alone and think of mischief. Safety first, after all,” she observed.

I thought about street thugs and wondered what would happen if they got into an argument with Cadian. I doubted it would go well for them. In fact, it would probably go badly enough that they wouldn't be getting into mischief ever again. “Safety first,” I agreed.

It wasn't hard to find AC, Air Celephias, a reliable shipping company I'd used before. Before I finalized the arrangements I called Jessica.

“Hey.”

“Lee! What's up? Where are you?”

“Oh, just up at the Mons Messina,” I replied airily. “I'm going to do a bit of climbing. I'll send pictures.”

“You're where?” she shrieked. “With the queen?”

“Oh, she's around here somewhere.”

“I'm so jealous.”

“I know. Can I ask you to do me a favor?”

“Love too.”

“I'm going to send you a few pictures, some sketches, that sort of thing. Can you have Hector take care of them until I get back?”

“Hector? I broke up with him days ago. I'm dating a Theo now. He's a senate aid.”

“That's terrible,” I lied. “Why?”

“Theo? He has season tickets to the Cavs,” she replied, referring to a sports team.

“The Cavs? I never knew you were a waterball fan.”

“I wasn't.”

“Oh. Right. Anyway, why'd you break up with Hector?”

“He's a pompous ass.”

I couldn't very well argue with that.

“Anyway, can you take care of the stuff anyway?”

“Love too. How are you handling your rent and stuff?”

“To be honest, I hadn't really thought about it.”

She sighed. “Lee, you're a mess. How long will you be gone?”

“I have no idea.”

“Lee!” she complained. “That's terrible. Want me to take care of it for you?”

“I don't know,” I waffled.

“Lee, how much is your rent?”

I told her.

“My dinner last night was half that. Listen, we'll make a deal. I'll take care of everything for now and you can pay me back when you return. In exchange I want details, pictures, everything.”

I felt guilty about letting her do this. I'd always avoided asking for her financial help before. But now that I thought about it, I didn't know what options I had. “Are you sure you can handle it?”

“Of course I can. This is my job.” She snorted. “Now you go off with that royal girlfriend of yours. I want details, man. Details. Dirty, sordid details of the affair.”

“We don't have any sordid details!” I insisted. “Or affairs!”

“Then make some! What are you doing over there?”

“Nothing!” I replied. “Actually, I'm not kidding. We haven't done anything.”

“Why not? You run off to the ends of the earth with her and you're not sleeping together yet?”

“No.”

“Get to it!” she ordered.

“There's that whole husband thing,” I retorted. “You know, Kuranos the Vengeful.”

“Oh. Right.”

There was a short, uncomfortable silence. “Speaking of whom, he's still asleep in the coffin, blissfully unaware of you entirely.”

“Good.”

“Lee, seriously though, be careful. Don't do anything dangerous.”

“Relax,” I reassured her. “Everything is perfectly safe.”

“I want you back in one piece!”

“I'll be back!” I was as emphatic as I could be.

“Good. Now go do something scandalous. I want something to relive vicariously.”

“Later, Jessica.”

“Scandal, Lee!”

I hung up on her.

Jessica was be the sister I'd never wanted. I rolled my eyes and returned to the ship with Cadian. Muggers were curiously absent.

We spent the night in Baiglor. There was some noise on deck during the night, but when I went up to investigate everything was quiet. Ludus was leaning against a gunwale with a self satisfied smile, playing with a short length of steel pipe. I looked at him inquiringly. He just smiled back, even more smugly.

“Weirdo,” I thought and went back to sleep.

We caught the next high tide and sailed further up the coast. The coast was merely the place where the ocean hit the edge of the vast plateau that laid underneath the Mons Messina. On our left, to port I think, the ocean waves crashed futilely against solid stone walls that rose hundred of feet above our heads. Behind that cliff was another, and another behind that, until the earth piled up into peaks that scraped the sky and climbed through low ocean clouds. My fingers twitched if I stared at the cliffs too long.

“No,” Carolyn preempted me.

“But-”

“No.”

“Aw,” I whined.

“There will be plenty of that later. Trust me.”

“But-” I didn't know how to finish so I just waved behind me at the rocks.

“Patience, Lee.”

I didn't have her practice at patience so I went below and painted. I felt like I would go crazy.

The next day we came to the river Rons. It tumbled down the the side of the stone in a narrow gorge filled with violent falls and the echoing roar of confined wrath. There was something distinctly angry about the sound of the plummeting river in the confining defile it had carved for itself. I think it wanted to get free. We slowed and halted just outside the turbulent water. I noticed then that the White Ship had gone back to it's previous appearance. I hadn't noticed the transition and that was even more exciting.

“We're about to begin the hard part,” Carolyn explained to me. She was standing at the wheel, facing the gorge. “Are you ready?”

“We're going to climb that!?” I exclaimed, excited.

“No. Go tie yourself in.”

I stared at her as her implied meaning sank in. “What?”

“Ludus, spread all sail! Cadian, I want every scrap of canvas open.”

“No,” I whispered.

“Yes.” She smiled. The furled sails dropped open and boomed as they caught the wind. We lurched forward like a gunshot, and raced into the chaotic foam at the cliff face. “Now, I strongly advise you to tie yourself in and hold on to something.”

We hit the first fall in a collision that seemed utterly out of place on a ship. The water grabbed the bow and yanked it down, lifting the rear of the ship high out of the water. I tumbled forward, clinging to a life line as the ship seemed to dive into the sea. Then the falls caught the deck and squirted us backwards like a spit watermelon seed. We rocked back, and the bow swung high into the air. I flew backwards and crashed into the deck again. The sails boomed again with the wind. Our vessel lurched forward, shoved by the wind, and we caught the steep fall with the bow. We hung there a moment.

There was another lurch, and we surged forward. I was dangling towards the back of the deck, and I saw the raging river rush by underneath us. There was absolutely no reason would wouldn't be sucked backwards and torn apart. Instead we picked up speed. Every mast and spar creaked with strain. We began to sail up a waterfall.

“Carolyn!” I yelled. I really had no idea what to say.

“I told you to lash yourself to something,” she reminded me.

I realized I was still only holding the rope, albeit in a death grip. I wasted no time tying that around myself and continuing to tie knots until I ran out of slack. If you can't tie a know, tie a lot, went an old seafaring rhyme that suddenly seemed terribly sensible. The gorge walls passed us in a stately parade.

Carolyn was standing, her body perpendicular to the deck and parallel with the sea far below. She wasn't tied in at all, but kept her hold on the wheel with an easy grip.

“What about you?” I asked.

“It takes more than this to knock the captain from the wheel of this ship,” she scoffed.

I looked up into the rigging and saw Ludus and Cadian still aloft. They were holding tight there with impassive expressions. Ludus looked down at me and suddenly slyly winked. I felt a sudden connection to him.

Then I realized again we were sailing up a waterfall and nearly lost my mind. The next couple hours were hell on my nerves.

We climbed up into winter. When we finally lurched over the edge of the top fall the ship hung in the air, balanced on the very stern end of the keel. I glanced over my shoulder and saw an incredible fall behind us. We were so high that seabirds above the ocean below were only distant specks. Breaking waves were small lines of white foam that tumbled into nothing against the rocks. The ship swayed, rocked back, and then the wind shoved us hard. We toppled forward. The splash sent two plumes up on either side that spread like wings. Then we continued our stately pace, this time level, as we retreated from the falls and the gorge behind us. The river howled with fury as we defied its grasp and made our way to the calmer torrent that raced for the ocean and freedom.

The air was colder here. I didn't really know how high we were, but the breeze had a biting chill. As we swept past the bank and wound into the great Mons Messina a few tiny flakes escaped their resting places on the snowbanks above. A single flake drifted lazily before me and landed on my nose. It was a tiny spot of cold that vanished instantly but promised many more to come.

End Chapter 5

Chapter 6

“How much further?” I asked over supper.

“In miles or days?” Carolyn, attached to the steerage by one hand, lowered a chicken wing and turned her head to me.

“Either.” I shrugged.

“Miles? Perhaps a hundred. It's hard to say since the Rons is never straight. It's a twisted thing that winds through the mountains for miles trying to get to the sea. Days are even harder to guess. Terrain, weather, and even route are so flexible a guess would be only a wild guess. Also, the wildlife could delay us.”

“I keep hearing about the wildlife. Is it really that dangerous?”

“Very,” she said emphatically.