

## 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 had 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?”

“Yes,” she said seriously.

“Even with the deadly duo?”

“The wildlife is why we brought the deadly duo.”

The Norad Contagaian is the encircling sea the surrounds the Messatic continent. The grim exterior of the continent is the Mons Messina, a ring of the tallest mountains in the world that guards the barren interior. I hear geologists are still trying to explain the plate tectonics of it. I also hear they aren't getting anywhere.

As for the Messata itself it's a sparsely populated land, vast in size and mostly unexplored. There are a couple of pretty simple reasons for that, Carolyn explained to me over dinner. The first is its remote position. It was thousands of miles away from any other land at the extreme north of the world. Now while Phi was in the midst of winter it was in its summer. The sea was warm now, but even still in the great interior plateau the temperature was cold. Intermittent snows would be a problem at the comparatively low altitudes of the Rons and rendered access to the great peaks like Icstath impossible during the winter.

Other than location and weather the only thing that grew well on the Messata was rocks. Farming was impossible, requiring any settlement like Baiglör to import all its food from elsewhere.

“What about hydroponics? Green houses and so forth?” I asked.

“Too cold in the winter. Too cold for most of the summer. Also, down at sea level the soil is bad. It's rich with heavy metals. Plants grown here usually have high concentrations of lead. Would you like to be slowly poisoned by everything you eat?” she asked rhetorically.

“Couldn't someone import dirt, or purify the dirt here?”

“Hideously expensive.”

“Oh.”

“The people who do live here mostly try to extract rare elements from the earth. Mining is big, but still very expensive, and that keeps operations small. The incredible wear on electronics is prohibitively draining on large operations also.”

“I’ve heard about that.” It was why my conversation with Jessica had been so short. Phone time was expensive. “What causes it?”

“The entire continent is much richer in metal than anywhere else in the world. Also, Pallas’ magnetic field directly touches the earth here. Erratic currents burn through electronic components and make long range radio unreliable.”

That was obnoxiously mundane. I had hoped it was a forbidding of the elder gods.

“Will we be able to use our radios?”

“Yes, but we won’t have much long range capabilities.”

“I see. Do we have good maps?”

“Yes. Satellite reconnaissance provided us with that.”

“What about the wildlife? Monsters and so forth?” I asked curiously.

“Most of what lives here is dangerous. There’s money to be made in that, but not much. Phi’s military does some training here, and I imagine most other countries do as well, but there isn’t much tactical advantage in maintaining large settlements. Nothing here but rocks. And even the most savage dragons usually don’t fly thousands of miles to waylay foreign cities.”

“What if they do?”

“Surface to air missile batteries.”

“Wouldn’t it be better to fight them on their home ground?”

“Why? Why exhaust ourselves going to their place of strength to attack when we can defend better and more easily?”

“Well then what about this Desian character? He fled here.”

Carolyn shrugged. “Well, this place is remote and isolated. If you need to run from the long arm of Kuranes, this is a good place to run too.”

“And we came here to chase him.”

“We came here to find answers. Kuranes, Desian, the entire Seventh Legion, all their stories end here. I doubt the scientists and wizards of Phi will learn anything far away in their safe colleges.”

“The Seventh Legion?”

“Kuran's personal army,” she explained. I noticed she never referred to him as her husband or in a more affectionate manner. I smiled a bit. “They were separate from the true army of Phi, not loyal to the land but Kuran himself.”

Carolyn considered her words carefully before speaking with distaste. “Kuran took the throne from his father in a bloodbath that cost the life of his every surviving relative. To do that he raised the an army of mercenaries. They were legitimized somewhat when he renamed them the Seventh legion, but not entirely. They did his dirty work. The stigma attached to that group is the reason there is no seventh legion now.”

“What kind of dirty work?”

Carolyn was silent for a while. We finished our meal on the pilot's deck and cleared the plates away. Hills crowned with frost covered trees marched by on the bank. The trees were dark pines that cast forbidding shadows. I pulled up a few buckets of water from the Rons and began to wash the plates.

“Isn't there lead in the water?” I asked. “Should we be cleaning with this, much less drinking it?”

“This high up the water should be fine. It's only a problem by the coast.”

I shrugged and continued washing up.

“Have you ever heard of Klagrash?” she asked.

“No.”

“Shortly before the islands of Vold sank and I married Kuran to secure the safety of my people, the nations of the Desert Kingdoms rose in revolt. Phi had an empire back then not based on trade, but the ruthless conquest of the earlier Kuran and their Warlords. I'm sure you've heard of Dread.”

“He wasn't a nice guy, as I recall.”

“The man was a monster. When he conquered the desert cities long before even I was born he crushed them. Klagrash was one such city. Since it was the heart of the military resistance to Kuran, he put every man, woman and child to death as a threat to the rest. Men were beheaded. Women were vertically impaled.” She had returned to the steering wheel but glanced over at me while she said this. “You know what vertical impalement is?”

“I can imagine,” I replied.

“You probably can't. Children, Lee. Children. Anyway, Klagresh was destroyed. He burned the bodies in the fields, polluting them for years to come. It took years for the earth to be able to grow crops again. It was centuries later that Klagresh rose from it's fall, and people lived there.”

“Something tells me they weren't to happy for that.”

“Hated of the Kuran was the religion of the desert for years. While Kuran was waging his civil war the people of Klagresh took advantage of Phi's weakness to declare independence.”

“I have to admit, I agree with them.”

“Don't. The first thing they did was execute every citizen of Phi in the same manner.”

“Well, if Dread did it first-” I trailed off.

“There's no justification for that, Lee. Dread was a monster. The men of Klagresh only sank to his level.

“When Kuran's power was cemented, a few years later, he didn't bother with diplomacy. He marched the seventh legion into the desert. Every city he came to was summarily destroyed. The men were all executed, and the rest turned loose, naked into the desert. They fled to other cities, bringing news with them. Strained to feed the refugees, the cities fell one after another to Kuran. Some fought, some surrendered and plead for mercy. It didn't matter. The men died, the rest were turned into the desert.

“Eventually, Kuran came to Klagresh. He ruined that city in a much more permanent manner than Dread had.”

“Worse than Dread?”

“Yes.” Carolyn stared ahead at the river as it passed between the steep banks. I watched her, wondering what she was thinking. “Klagresh never recovered. The city was never rebuilt, and even now no one lives on the site. It's a twisted, evil place. There are things of the old world that have no place here.”

I thought for a while. Carolyn must have married shortly after all this. I could not reconcile her with having married that man. The two thoughts would not mix in my mind.

“Why did you do it?” I asked.

“Do what?”

“Marry the bastard?”

Carolyn sighed. “The isle of Nuetha was the first to go. Volcanoes began spewing smoke and fumes, and the people fled. Finally, lava poured down the shores, burned the cities and forests. Everyone fled, some to Vold, the largest and greatest of the islands in the old alliance, some to Agremedia, where I lived. They ran to anywhere they could go. Not long after I remember a great noise in the night. Waves tore apart the beaches of Agremedia. In the morning I rose and saw only a dark cloud where Nuetha had been.

“It awakened the mountains of Vold. Less than a day later they began to fume and rumble, and the people who were just arriving panicked. More came to Agremedia. We had no lofty peaks, and they thought they would be safe. My father took them in as he could. Finally we watched as the horizon turned red, and the sea boiled. That night the fires lit the sky and hid the stars. In the morning Vold too was no more.

“The earth quieted but slept restlessly. Rogue waves plagued the fishermen. Everyone was terrified. We had no place left to go, and no ships to move us.”

“Kuranos sent envoys. The fleets of Phi were vast even then, and the great city of Celephias could house multitudes. In exchange, Kuranos needed an heir, someone he could trust. The memory of his deeds in Phi was still fresh, and he couldn't trust any woman of his home in his bed. One thing led to another. Then a crack appeared in the hills of Adelaide, venting sulfurous gases. The earth began to stir again, and every day the city shook.”

Carolyn shrugged, resigned. “I did what needed to be done, and no one else could do. My father led our people to safety, and I went to Kuranos.”

“And then Desian the Terror interrupted everything,” I interjected.

“Indeed.” She smiled.

The more I thought about it, the less I disliked Desian. Perhaps 'the Terror' was too strong an epithet for him.

“How did we even get onto this topic?” she asked finally.

“We were talking about why so few people live in Messata,” I answered.

“Yes, we were,” she agreed.

I looked past her to stare at the passing scenery. Around us the incredible mountains continued to watch us as we crept by. A large brown creature came shuffling down from the edge of the trees and lapped at the water. I watched it. “At least the scenery is nice.”

The beast seemed to sense my eyes on it. It looked up with deep brown eyes and rubbed its nose with a furry paw. I smiled at it and waved.

It reared onto its hind legs and spread its forelegs wide. Then it roared, a deep ugly sound that bounced off the mountains and echoed down the river's course behind us. Its big lips pulled back from long, unnaturally sharp fangs. Somehow its jawbones must have shifted, because the teeth began to jut forward like they were reaching for me. That must have been an optical illusion, like how the eyes of the monster had gone totally red.

I stopped smiling and put my hand down.

The beast dropped and shambled back into the woods.

“Charming,” Carolyn deadpanned. “Are you going to paint that too?”

“Not right now,” I deferred. “Right now I'm going to ask Ludus and Cadian for more combat training.” I noticed I had retreated from the railing and was now at Carolyn's side.

“That might be a good idea,” she replied. She reached out and scratched the back of my neck a few times before she patted me on the shoulder.

“If you'll excuse me,” I murmured and went looking for the two bodyguards.

We continued to climb steadily, and the workouts shifted from combat exercises to acclimation. The air grew thin and cold. Soon breathing grew difficult. Short climbs into the rigging left me feeling winded with splitting headaches. It was the same sensation I got every time I went home to Nirmo to visit. The only cure is more conditioning to force the body to adapt. Even Ludus and Cadian were having difficulty with the altitude. We trained and trained, while Carolyn sailed us upstream, unruffled and apparently unfazed by the change in air pressure. When I asked she replied, 'Magic.'

Not many days later we came to the wide rapids of Wellidis where the Rons plunged down below the snow line on it's way behind us to the sea. The river was wide here and not terribly fast. Higher up near a cleft in the shoulder between two peaks it was different entirely. There the water was funneled between two great cliffs, and it howled and leaped down like savage beasts fleeing a terror. Our plan was to sail up these like the cataracts below. We would go in the morning.

Eventually sleep took me. My dreams were black and out of focus. Strange emotions followed each other in a confused jumble where nothing was connected to what had come before. Most of all was remorse and worry, with intense but distant ambition. Ultimately the bizarre experience drove me from sleep, and I threw on some clothing to stumble onto the deck above.

Ludus was already there. He was perched on the bow railing, facing back towards me. For a moment I was incredibly intimidated by that strange, silent man. The way he hunched forward when he sat made him seem to loom over the deck. The moon was creeping behind the peaks, and cast shadows that reached out to shroud him and leave the deck exposed.

Carolyn had been talking but went silent the moment I emerged. On the wheel deck she regarded me seriously, giving me the impression she had been speaking about me. That was not terribly odd. There were only four of us on the trip, and each was pivotal to the mission in their own way. What was odd was the way she looked exhausted. Had almost a month of missed sleep caught up with her at once?

For an awkward moment no one said anything. Then Ludus rotated himself so he was overlooking the water. I climbed to Carolyn's side.

"Insomnia," I explained.

"You should keep trying. We'll enter the half-basin in the morning. You may not get much sleep at all after that."

"The Icstath half-basin?"

"Yes. Those peaks are the basin wall." She pointed up at line of mountains that we stood before. "We should be less than twenty miles away after we pass the rapids."

"I hadn't realized we were so close," I admitted.

"If you get a map, I'll show you," she offered.

I went bellow and found the thick book of satellite photos and topographical maps. I also grabbed a light folding table, since she would probably still be stuck to the wheel. With a few pens and pencils just in case, I returned to her.

She pointed at the big blob of white at the center of the map of the northern hemisphere. "That's the polar ice. This," She indicated a small half-circle of land that protruded from one end. "is the Messata. About half of it is under the polar ice. The next closest bit of land is this, Osibius Isle. Other than that, there's nothing for about three thousand miles in any direction."

"Osibius Isle?" I asked, curious why anyone would name an island after the god of murder.

"A whaling ship ran aground there during the reign of Kuranos the fifty fourth. Even though there was plenty of food and supplies, the survivors had exterminated each other before anyone found them. Now it's a nature preserve."

"Lovely," I replied dryly.

"Apparently they all went stir crazy. That or they were cursed by the ancient gods." Carolyn shrugged. "They're dead. Anyway, the Mons Messata are this ring of mountains here. Farther north they get enmeshed in the ice. The continent sinks underwater there and only the tops of the mountains rise above sea level. Farther south, where we are, they form the outer spine of the continental plate. That is also where they're the highest. That includes the Icstath half-basin."

There was a wet thump over the side in the dark. Our heads snapped up as Ludus rolled silently backwards off the gunwale. He crept along the deck on his stomach until he could glance over the side where the noise had come from.

Then he gave a grunt, reached down, and yanked Cadian over the side and onto the boat.

"It's clear," Cadian reported. He was dressed in a tight black suit that dripped on the deck. He discarded it and his light clothing underneath was dry. "The ruins are deserted."

"Any signs of Kuranos?" Carolyn asked.

"Everywhere. There's a mule path that runs up the side of the rapids. The mile markers are seventh legion insignia. At the top the defile is fortified on both sides. It is, or was, a legitimate fortress. It doesn't look like it fell by violence, but there's no signs of life. Both gates are sealed, and the walls mostly intact. I scouted around but didn't see any signs that anyone's lived there in hundreds of years. No bodies either." Cadian shrugged. "As for the rapids, they're even worse than expected. There are seven major drops."

Carolyn nodded slowly, then turned and stared upriver into the night. The roar was loud even this far away, echoing down the canyon towards us.

"What about beyond the basin wall?" she asked.

"No lights."

She thought for another long moment.

"We'll keep going as planned," she decided. "If we have the time, we'll do some daylight recon of the ruins."

The other two nodded. “In the meantime, Cadian go change your clothes and get some sleep. Ludus, head below. I'll take the watch.”

“What about me?” I asked.

“You should try to get some sleep as well. I have some things I want to think about tonight.”

I shrugged and went below. Sleep did not come easily, and it seemed morning arrived before I even closed my eyes.

End Chapter 6

Chapter 7

It was snowing at the top of the rapids. The snow didn't stick to the ground, but wafted down around the ship and limited visibility. Ascending the canyon had been treacherous more than tricky. It had taken a full day, and we spent the night lying at anchor in a still pool while Cadian and Ludus ranged through ruins and short pine forests. They returned shortly before morning.

“Did you find anyone?” Carolyn asked.

Neither one of them replied immediately. Ludus went below without speaking. Cadian considered his words carefully before replying, “Sort of.”