

Chapter 7

Strong winds were pulling the snow from the surrounding peaks down on us when we came to the top of the rapids. The snow wasn't sticking everywhere, 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.”

I looked at Carolyn. She looked at me. We both looked at Cadian.

“Sort of?”

“Kuran's Seventh Legion is still here. They fortified this entire basin when they first arrived, and they still hold it in parts.”

“But they'd all be dead by now,” Carolyn observed.

“They are,” Cadian replied.

“This conversation cannot go well,” I said to myself. “There is no way I'm going to want to hear what comes next.”

“What happened?” Carolyn asked.

“We found fresh tracks around midnight. We followed and caught up with a pair of legionaries climbing a staircase set into the cliff wall. They were dressed in the summer armor of the Seventh Legion. We greeted them using the codewords you gave us. They attacked.”

“Bullets didn't stop them,” Ludus announced in his voice like breaking rocks. He had returned silently. “We had to use force.”

The three of us paused for a moment, but Ludus' unusual loquacity didn't continue. Cadian resumed the story.

“We used the silenced SMGs first. The rounds penetrated the armor but didn't terminate their advance. I had to push one off the ledge. Ludus stopped the other with a rock.”

“Ah, you cast sleep on him,” I commented.

“No, I hit him in the head,” Ludus replied.

I opened my mouth to explain, but stopped and let it go.

Cadain continued, "When I examine the body its internal organs were frozen solid. Just touching him make my fingers numb through the gloves. He wore this on his armor." He handed Carolyn a small medallion.

"Veteran of the Desert Campaign," she translated. "Klagresh. In the center is the Seventh Seal." She looked up at Cadain and sent him a long, level look. "Then what happened?" She handed me the medal. It was bronze or something similar, and piercing cold through my gloves. The surface was hardly tarnished. The casting was crude and looked mass produced. It also looked very old.

"We hid the bodies and backtracked. They had come from a pallisade built nearby. It had a log wall, one large hall, and a small outbuilding."

"Celephian long term field encampment," Carolyn explained. The larger hall is where everyone stays. The smaller building is for storage, either of food or prisoners. There should be sanitary facilities also."

"We didn't check," Cadain admitted. "We returned here directly."

"Get ready to sail," Carolyn ordered. "We leave immediately."

The other two nodded. Ludus had two assault rifles with him, and he gave one to Cadain. They also both buckled broadswords onto their belts. After that they scurried into the rigging and got to work. Carolyn turned to me.

"Their descendants?" I asked, hoping but not expecting.

"Armies don't bring women with them," Carolyn replied. "And there certainly weren't enough people here to begin with."

I had expected that. "So?"

"Kuranos had few scruples when dealing with old powers of the earth, and some of those powers do not rest after being called up. Lee, you had better go below and arm yourself. Get a sword."

"Yes, ma'am!"

I hustled down to the large room where we kept the weapons. Inside were several swords, an axe, half a dozen handguns, knives, and a large, ominous looking black case carefully padlocked in. There were a couple of machine pistols in a drawer at the bottom. Those looked very serious, and I considered taking one, but realistically I had no idea how to shoot them. This also didn't seem like a good time for experimentation. I took one of the short broadswords similar to what the two bodyguards were carrying and belted it on.

Simplicity had given it a bit of elegance, but the weapon was inherently a purely functional implement of chopping, stabbing, and slicing. The blade was slightly less than two feet long, broad and thin with a groove down the middle. The sheath was similar. It was made of nylon with rigid plastic reinforcement. A small pouch held a sharpening kit. The sword clicked when it slid in and was held there by a small clasp. I belted the sheath onto my side and tried not to let it get tangled in my legs. I considered laying it across my back, but that would look retarded.

The weapon was much lighter than I had expected. The practice swords Cadian and Ludus had trained me on were significantly heavier and not as well balanced. I whipped it around a few times in the hallway, getting a feel for the weight, and realized it felt surprisingly comfortable in my hand.

I then had a moment of surprising intelligence and decided to get cold weather gear as well, just in case. My room was small and off the main hallway, mostly filled with canvas, paint, and a chest of clothing. I was collecting my gloves when gunfire erupted on the main deck.

Sudden memories of my last evening in Phi came to mind. I'd frozen then and required Ludus to save me, something that burned and infuriated me now. This time I was armed, had some training, and come hell or high water I was not going to require saving again. I threw on my gloves and stuck my head into the hallway. There was nothing to see.

More gunfire sounded off, then stopped suddenly. I heard heavy footsteps, crashing sounds, and bodies being torn apart. I stole to the base of the stairway and listened. Everything suddenly went very still, and I waited.

Mist began to waft under the crack in the door at the top of the stairway. It was thick and pooled down the stairway like oil. Mental alarm bells started chiming. I glanced right, left, then up, and noticed the beams of the deck above were uncovered by any false ceiling. They were set with ornamental carvings of the history of Phi, like the rest of the ship. The few lanterns down here were widely spaced, and cast deep shadows in the crevices above. I sprang up, grabbed on, and wedged myself into the ceiling.

Footsteps, many of them, sounded off behind the door above. With sword in hand, I froze.

The door suddenly slammed open. Someone stormed down the stairs, followed by many more. Their grieved shins came into my line of sight, then short metal skirts, then chest and breastplates. A bunch of them, perhaps a dozen, charged downstairs and into the hall below me. Their armor was a piecemeal match up, with pieces missing or simply rusted away. With them came the fog. It tumbled down the stairs, crashed into the walls, and splashed up around me like water before dissipating like vapor. I tried to hold my breath.

The men were dead; clearly, undeniably dead. Their eyes, though bright and vicious, were cold like well sculpted wax. The veins underneath their skin were also dark purple, and their skin was pale and waxy. Their quick movements were stiff and forced. Watching them stalk down into the ship was like watching marionettes. Each had the same logo as the badge I'd seen before. When they got below me their helmets blocked my sight of their eyes, taking away their alien aspect.

When they had passed underneath me I cleared my mind, prepared myself, and released my hold on the ceiling.

Nothing happened. I tried to release my hands and feet, but they were locked in place. My body was perfectly immobile, even my eyes, to the point I could no longer even blink.

They charged about below, checking every room. I could hear their boot steps all over the hold of the ship, trudging about searching. Finally a cluster of them started to form beneath me. They exchanged short, barking grunts either interrogative or negative. More arrived. I stopped struggling to get free and remained very still. The only movement I had control over was my breathing. I stopped that. All dozen

of them stood in the hallway, grunting at each other. Utterly paralyzed, I stared down hoping none of them looked up.

Then the door opened, and a loud, commanding bark echoed down from above. Grunting and coughing, they marched back the way they had come. Footsteps continued to mill about on the deck but even that finally stopped. The mist began to fade away beneath me. For a long time I stayed motionless, second guessing myself and thinking about what I should have done.

In the middle of that my muscles relaxed all at once, letting me face-plant into the deck. It knocked the wind out of me so I couldn't howl with pain. When I had my breath back I got up and snuck up the stairs. I paused, readied my sword, and started talking myself into opening the door. All right, Lee, I thought. Crack the the door, and just glance around. Everything's silent out there. There's shouldn't be anyone. You can do this.

You can do this, I thought again, a little more insistently. Ready? Set.

The door was yanked open from the other side. I saw armor, a helmet, and punched the face as hard as I could. It scared me so bad I forgot I had a sword. Fortunately I punched it with the sword, the point of which crunched through the nose bone and stabbed into the head casing. I yanked back, dragging the legionaire in with the blade stuck in his brain and dropped him down the flight of stairs. I glanced out the doorway. No one else was there.

After shutting the door I went down and looked at him. His skin was all blue now, the spit in his open mouth congealed to ice, and the blood in the blade had crystalized. I didn't even bother trying to pull the sword out. I got another one from the cabinet and ran back on deck.

“Well, you killed someone,” I told myself aloud. “You all right with that?”

“It wasn't really a someone,” I replied. “More like a demon. And demons aren't people.”

I thought about that for a bit.

“Demon it is,” I decided. “Any objections?”

I didn't have any.

I looked around. The other demons were all gone, but their footprints were still visible in the falling snow. They lead out into the white haze.

The white ship was by now so familiar it seemed like home. The thin woods outside were dark and menacing. Childhood fears of dark places always involved monsters and demons for me, and now I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that they were out there. I stood on the edge of a decision.

“Oh, the hell with it,” I said aloud. I had no intention of putting the time or energy into figuring out what the smart thing to do next was, so I ran to the edge of the ship and leaped off to the riverbank below. I had got to stop talking to myself.

I ran through the snow with a naked blade. My skin felt hot from within so the snow was tiny spots of cold that drifted down from the sky. The snow was thin underfoot, barely a few inches deep. My

footsteps faded behind me.

After a thin copse of trees a powerfully built searcher spotted me, coming back to check on the first one. He bellowed and charged. I sprinted to meet him.

It was easier because he wasn't a man anymore. The demon in him was everything. He swung in a vast overhand motion that cut the air and slashed falling flakes with the frozen edge. I leaned left to let his blade go by, and my own to come up in a whistling arc that caught him in the side, severing skin and muscle to his chest. That stopped him.

I kicked him in the chest and yanked my sword out. Icicles were forming in the cut, sticking red frost to the edge. It came free with a crunch. He tried to swing at my head, but too slow. His strength faded. I chopped his neck in half, and he was frozen by the time his body dropped.

I kept running.

Visibility was only a few few yards. Trees and rocks rushed past me in the dark when the next demon came. His voice came out of the white dark before he did.

This one was shouting too. I wondered, is he calling to someone else? Or is he just yelling out of viciousness? When only ten feet away I slung a rock at him. He dodged. I swung at his chest.

Like I had, he swayed and I missed. His riposte came for my throat, and I parried. The shock of cold when our blades met froze my hand, cementing it to the handle. I kicked him in the leg.

It surprised him. Maybe he was still expecting his long lost armor. Instead his knee buckled but didn't collapse. I caught him in the guts and sank cold, now freezing, steel into him to the hand guard. We were close enough that I blocked his death strike with my shoulder.

I planted my feet and wrenched, dragging my sword free and tearing ribbons of frozen intestine out with it. The demon stumbled. Again I took his head off at the shoulders.

I put down two more by the time I came to the palisade. My hand had thawed just enough for me to sheath the weapon when the wall of rough hewn logs appeared. They were bound together with ice instead of mortar or nails, perhaps three times my height. I was over in seconds.

On the other side I fell onto another, sweeping out my sword and down onto his head. Bones shattered instead of cut. He never had time to make a sound. Then I was gone into the low building that held the others.

Inside was one guard. Behind him Ludus and Cadian were mummified in rope. Carolyn was shackled to the wall at her feet and neck. The guard crossed swords with me briefly, each impact hurt my joints and sent shock waves of frostbite up my arm. I fainted wide and he went for it, taking his weapon far from his body as he attempted to connect again. He wanted to wear me out with cold. Instead my shoulder caught him in the chest. We lurched to the wall. I was too close for him to swing, but I stabbed him through, sinking my sword into the brittle wood at his back. He gurgled and stopped, ice-crusting to the wall behind him. I took his keys.

Unfortunately, I couldn't let go of the weapon. My leather glove was hard as steel. After a moment of

useless thrashing I realized I was stuck in place.

Turning to Carolyn, I shrugged and tossed her the keys. She was out in a moment.

“How are-”

“Fine. You? Can you still fight?” she cut me off.

“If I can get away from the wall,” I answered.

She smiled, took my hand, and rubbed it once like a friction burn. The glove suddenly relaxed and feeling rushed back to my fingers.

“Better?”

“Much.”

“Good. Get Cadian. I'll get Ludus.”

By the time he was free Carolyn had unlocked Ludus. Those two sprang to their feet.

“Take the sword,” I offered Ludus, indicating the frozen statue with my head.

“Keep it,” he refused. “You're doing well.”

I shrugged. “Carolyn, can you do that little trick and get it unstuck?” I asked.

She took two steps, pivoted on her left toe, and yanked her right knee to her shoulder. Then she stomped on the hilt of the blade, splintering the wall and tearing my blade from the frozen guard. Little pieces of him shot in all directions. She brushed off the bits of demon and handed the weapon back to me.

“That works,” I replied.

Cadian was looking carefully out the door while Ludus picked up a length of chain. In his hands it looked dangerous. So armed he went to the door.

“All clear?” Carolyn asked. All of us were clustered around the doorway, looking at the dark compound.

“Let's go,” Cadian replied and lead the way out.

The element of surprise was fading if not gone. Four demons met us right outside, coming around the corner. They never stood a chance.

Ludus and Cadian hit them like the wrath of God. Before I could move to help bodies started falling. Carolyn and I ran for the palisade.

I leaped and grabbed a hold five feet up. She climbed me, scurrying up my legs, back, and shoulders

while I clung to knots in the logs. Behind us more guards were coming. The two bodyguards were dispatching them with technical ease. I went up, grabbed Carolyn's ass, and shoved her over before I hung back down.

“Clear!” she yelled.

Ludus broke free and darted up me the same way she had. He threw the chain up, caught a log tip, and dragged himself over.

“Clear!” he echoed, dropping on the far side.

Cadian was alone, facing five men. He was a symphony composed by a master with his hands and feet. Peering over my shoulder I couldn't even see him strike in the snowfall. Instead I saw sprays of freezing blood that landed on the ground like wide red wings. Demons howled as they died, calling to others.

A whole pack of the guards was rushing out of the larger hall. Cadian dropped his last opponent and took off towards me. I climbed up to grab the dangling chain and extended myself all the way. It felt terribly exposed lying against the wall. Cadian hit the wall without slowing down. He took two running steps up it and caught my foot.

I heaved. We both rose and then I wrapped my arms about the top. My hands felt like torture. Cadian scaled me and pulled the chain after him, dragging me over as well. We dropped on the other side. Demons leaped at my feet moments too late.

The fall hurt. The rest were all up and ready, looking in either direction when I stood. Carolyn helped me.

The great gate was opening. The creak of ropes and the groan of wood told us the horde was coming out. We fled into the dark.

“The ship?” I asked. I never actually planned any of this. My hopes hadn't even gotten to this point.

Carolyn took over. “The woods first. Run.”

When we came to the cover of brush the snow stopped. I suddenly realized how cold I would be if I had any blood in my adrenaline stream. There was no time for that. Instead we raced across a bed of pine needles, dodging between trees, as the shouts and inarticulate cries from the mass of our pursuers chased us through the forest.

“We're going to make it!” I hoped.

“No, we aren't,” she denied flatly. “Ludus, Cadian, buy time.”

They vanished. One second they were there, one in front and one behind, and then they weren't. Carolyn and I ran on alone.

The White Ship was where we left it. Ice formed in the rigging was holding it fast when we scurried up some cargo netting. Carolyn's hand touched the wheel. The ropes flared with a brilliant light, casting

the ice away. I heaved at the capstan. It took ten men to turn it. Now it moved easily at my hand and the anchor chain rose. There were muted shouts from the dark line of trees on the shore. We readied the ship and turned it around to run.

“We can't leave them,” I told her.

“Death first,” she snapped, mad I would even say such a thing. Forever we waited, rocking slightly in the current. I realized I wasn't cold any more. It was either the magic of the ship or hypothermia.

Suddenly two men broke from the edge of the woods. They were running faster than men, moving like angels. Demons poured from the woods behind them, the hunting pack of hell chasing its prey.

“Come on,” I muttered through clenched teeth, gripped by worry.

It didn't matter. Those two were already running beyond their limits, covering ground like a hot wind.

“Throw ropes over the aft,” Carolyn ordered.

“The what?”

“The back!”

I did while she started the ship moving. We were beginning to pick up speed when they dove into the icy water, swimming strong for us. As soon as their hands touched the rope I was yanked, straining against their weight. The horde came after. The water froze under their feet, letting them run across the surface.

The two shivering swimmers came over the side, and we collapsed into a heap. Their skin was white and their lips were blue. Again, both of them were up before me, stripping their wet clothes off.

Demons began clawing their way over the side as we ran up the narrow river. I drew my sword, and the three of us did violence upon them fitting the hellish ghastrs that animated their bodies.

I was moving slowly. The first demon I could only hold at bay for a few seconds. Then Ludus' man killing hands closed upon him, and he was dead. The horde was slowed by the climb, and my two companions crushed those that gained the deck while I chopped at their heads if they didn't. I stabbed one and realized suddenly I couldn't move. Like a statue I stood while the fight raged about me. Consciousness stayed long enough for me to see the lase of the enemy go over the side, the horde chasing us fall away as we raced up stream. Then I dropped like a stone.

My last thought was surprise. It was hypothermia after all.

I woke up in bed, bundled by covers and hot water bottles. Carolyn sat beside me reading by candlelight.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey, you. How do you feel?” She put aside her book and touched my face, my head, and my hands.

“Warm and wonderful.”

“Good. I was terribly worried about you.”

“Sorry.”

She laughed and stroked my hair. Satisfied, she smiled and bookmarked her place.

“You had some pretty bad frostbite,” she told me. “The early stages of severe hypothermia.”

“Did you lie naked with me to share body heat?”

“I stuck you in a warm bath,” she replied dryly.

“Damn.”

“Life is full of tragedy.”

“The others?”

“Also in bed, bundled up. They'll be fine.”

“Even after swimming?”

“Yes.”

“Those guys are monsters,” I observed, deeply impressed.

“See why we brought them?”

“I never doubted you.”

“Good. Don't.”

She touched my face again. I let myself rest with my head in her hands.

End Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Later, on deck, Cadian congratulated me. He did ask, “Why didn't you bring a gun?”

“I thought guns didn't work on demons.”

“What about a flare gun?”

I stared blankly at him. “That's ingenious,” I finally concluded.

Cadian shrugged. “Good work anyway.” He nodded, and went back to the rigging. I stared after him.

A flare gun, I thought. Next time, remember the flare gun.