

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.

Not to get preachy, but I have noticed that the few times I've really lost it over a girl I got psychic powers. By example, when I finally got out of bed I knew that Carolyn wasn't at the ship's helm and by extension was not even on the ship. I pulled on some clothes and stumbled onto the deck. As expected, the steerage was vacant. Surprisingly, both Cadian and Ludus were aboard, doing minor bits of maintenance around the ship. I asked Cadian where our fearless leader was.

"Doing recon," he answered.

"Why her and not you?"

"Gives us a bit more time to recuperate from the demons. You did good work with that."

Then we had the exchange I mentioned previously. When I was alone again I went to the edge of the deck. We were anchored in a tiny pond barely larger than the ship's hull. On all sides was a steep bank that lead to dark green forests of evergreen trees. A rope ladder was dangling over the side, and I let myself down it.

The ship so filled the pool that I could step directly from the ladder to the bank. Ice and snow on the water prevented me from seeing how deep it was, but somehow I doubted I wanted to know.

"Don't go far," Cadian warned from above me. I looked up and agreed. He tossed me a sword, the one I'd used against the demons without a word and disappeared back beyond the railing. I belted it on. The weight felt oddly comfortable. With my jacket pulled tight I trudged up the bank and stepped into the woods.

It was warmer in here. The air was silent and still. I walked along on a thick carpet of pine needles, silent as a ghost, peering about in the dim light. Not for the first time I noticed this entire continent seemed dark. Even now in the polar summer, shadows were deep. Initially I made a slow circle of the ship. There was only one small stream that left the pond, a trickle of water no wider than my hand. In the gloom I stepped over it without noticing and only on returning, searching for however the ship had come from the river did I notice it. I considered the stream, perhaps finger deep, and the great keel of the White Ship. That made me feel a little better.

"Good evening, child."

I looked up and froze. The woods were empty, and the words could have come from a ghost.

“Easy, child. You walked past me twice, and I haven't harmed you.”

The base of a tree bulged, distended, and grew suddenly. The form rose and separated itself from the ground, shedding shadows like water, until a woman in a cloak of brown and gray stood before me. She remained several feet away and dimly lit, but withdrew her empty hands from her cloak. They were open and relaxed. Still, so well did she blend into the forest that only when she pulled her cowl back and let her dark brown hair loose did I see her well enough to know she was a woman.

Unless she was a really exceptional transvestite. I had this one client who wanted a glamor shot, and only when he paid me with a check did I realize the truth. I had nearly asked him out. I think I swore off dating for a month after that. True story.

“Good evening, ma'am,” I replied, a bit more at ease.

“You're here with the Lady Kuranos,” she observed. It wasn't a question. “But she hasn't placed her mark upon you. Odd. Regardless, welcome to the woods.”

“Thank you.”

She stood still, perhaps waiting, while I stared at her. Neither one of us spoke. If she was waiting for something, she betrayed no hint of impatience when she didn't immediately get it. I had no idea what to say to her. So for a while I smiled politely at her, and she regarded me seriously.

“I'm Lee, by the way. Lee Harper.”

“You were named by the power of Rhyksus? You're a great child indeed. Please know me as Sylvia. It is the closest you have to my language.”

This was getting stranger and stranger. Every time I thought nothing else could weird me out, something on this trip was happy to prove me wrong. “Thank you, ma'am. I am honored you shared your name with me.” There was a tempting little voice in the back of my head that whispered I should just let go and be as weird as possible back. For added effect, I bowed.

“Named by Rhyksus, you bow to me? I thank you.” And she bowed to me, deeply and more gracefully than I did. Naturally. While bent over at the waist her head suddenly flashed up and sideways. She stared into the gloom and then straightened like a released spring. “The Lady Kuranos. Good luck to you.”

I looked out where she had and saw nothing. When I turned back, she was gone. That part at least didn't surprise me in the slightest.

Moving quickly and silently on the pin needle carpet, I set off. Carolyn emerged from the gloom walking towards me, moving quickly. I stopped in front of her with a dry look on my face.

“Are these woods inhabited by anything else? Other than possibly demons, I mean. Vampires, elves, pixies?”

“Never met any pixies. Why?”

“I just met had an extremely odd conversation with a woman not a minute ago.” I related the details.
“Any ideas?”

“Sylvia?”

“That's what she said was the closest my language had.”

“Green hair? Brown skin?”

“Brown hair, tan skin,” I corrected.

“Hmm. Are you sure? The light can be deceptive,” she probed, doubtfully.

“Carolyn, I'm an artist. I paint for a living. Trust me, I know brown.”

“Very well,” she admitted. “From the way she was speaking I would say elf, but her coloring is all wrong and I don't know of any elves this far north. Possibly a vampire. The cold wouldn't bother her then. Did you get any impression of menace? Hungry neck staring?”

“Nope. Though she did vanish when you were coming.”

“That doesn't make any sense. Since she referred to me as Lady Kuranos and she certainly doesn't sound familiar, I would imagine she would only know of me through Lord Kuranos. But with his reputation, she probably would have just killed you for being associated with me. And she didn't. Dammit.”

“Thanks,” I replied blandly.

Carolyn stared pensively into the woods, while I watched the gears turning inside her head. She broke out of her reverie to ask, “What?”

“I said 'thanks.'”

She sent me a blank stare, but suddenly realization sprang on her. “Oh. Sorry. I just hate mysteries.”

Something about the way she said that made me laugh, and I wanted to pick her up and twirl her around forever. That would undoubtedly have been a bad idea. Instead I just smiled at her and offered her my arm. “May I escort you back your ship, Lady Kuranos?”

Carolyn stared at me like I'd lost my mind.

I held my arm out, seriously, to show I meant it.

“Lee, the dead old goat may very well be under our very feet.”

“He's peacefully sleeping the sleep of the dead in Celephais. Besides, these woods are dark. And treacherous. Strange women abound. My lady should not go unescorted.” I was still acting a little under

the influence of that little whispering voice.

Carolyn looked at me very calmly. Then she looked down at my sword, looked back at my face, and shook her head sadly.

“Lee, I think the altitude is getting to your head.”

I grinned like an idiot.

She sighed, took my arm, and we walked back to the ship.

For two days we hid in those woods. Periodically one of us would patrol the outskirts of the small ring of trees that sheltered the ship. Occasionally we saw movement in the distance. The river Rons was within sight, several miles away. Carolyn returned the first evening and said she had made her way almost to its banks. A party of demons had trudged past, going back the way we'd come, and had overlooked her entirely. The second day was quieter. At no point did I meet Silvia again. No one else reported seeing her either.

On the third day she and Ludus went out for an extended reconnoiter of the environs. A few hours later they returned. Carolyn had a pensive, thoughtful expression. She greeted me on the deck with a distracted air.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“All right.” She turned and made as if to continue past me, but I blocked her way.

“Carolyn, how did it go?”

Her habit of getting so caught up in her own thoughts she ignored me was beginning to get on my nerves. I caught her gaze and held it, non-judgmentally but insistent.

She smiled, amused. Then she sized me up, and shrugged. “Do you want to see Icstath?” she asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then get some your gear. I'll show you. Cadian! Watch the ship. I'm going to take Lee out to see the mountain.” She tapped me on the chest and smiled. “After all, it's up to you to find a way to climb it.”

I belted on a sword, holstered a pistol, and buttoned up my white and gray outer camouflage. The three of us crept back into the woods and away from the ship.

Ludus was moving easily, by all appearances completely recovered from the difficulties we had had. He moved easily through the cold woods, silent as always, somehow finding a way to breathe so his breath never misted. His expression was blank, like usual.

Carolyn and I crept along behind him. I had my eyes open for the woman only I had seen. Carolyn kept swiveling her head as well, eyes searching the woods. Neither of us spoke.

Soon we came to the edge of the forest, where the trees ended at the top of a steep bluff of broken stone

and thin ice. I hadn't left the cover of the woods in my scouting trips, so I took a few minutes to get my bearings. By which I meant I stared, mouth open, at Icsthath.

There was no question which mountain it was. That would be absurd. Peaks on all sides towered above me, dwarfing the mountains of Nirmo where I had been raised. Even though they were miles away, the flanks of the basin wall soared above me. A cloud bank huddled against the side of the southern face, and the peaks jutted their craggy heads above it, into the pale blue air. Smaller clouds clung to the tips of them, like wisps of hair on bald men.

Icsthath towered above them. Icsthath towered above everything. Words cannot convey the sheer, absolute height of that monstrosity of stone. Various strata of clouds clung to it at different levels, negligible in size compared to it. Courdesnse, standing twenty two thousand feet tall, stood at it's side like a tiny child next with his father. Massive shoulders of frosted stone spread out from the central peak, falling away to the other sky scraping mammoths on either side.

There was a sheer, unbridled and unapologetic power to it. Unquestionably, here was an edifice that stood as the product of eons of time and inconceivable natural forces. Those forces, whether they were attributed to plate tectonics or the will of gods, had bent such effort into creating this giant that it was only fitting that it reached above our world. It made me giddy.

"Icsthath, Lee. In all it's glory."

"Thirty seven thousand, four hundred and fifty three feet of it," I replied. I spoke the figures absently, trying to keep the giggled of laughter in. It was ridiculous. My mind was refusing to accept what I was seeing, and bits of hilarity escaped me as I tried to come to terms with it. "The basin floor is almost twelve thousand feet from sea level at the foot. It's five miles above us, right now."

Ludus had lurched off to investigate something, leaving the two of us alone. Carolyn stood beside me, and she interlaced her fingers in one of my hands. "Yes, I know. It's why you're here."

"It's, it's perfect. It's God's definition of a mountain. When Morpheus dreams of mountains, we see Icsthath. The top mile and a half is a perfect cone," I was gesturing with my free hand, pointing out features as I talked about them. The prominences on either side, Yordis and Drum, mark the shoulders. They're like shoulder guards. Yordis is on the south. It rises seven hundred feet from rest of the peak, and marks the southern sweep, the ridge that drops down to meet Courdesnse. It drops to meet Courdesnse, Carolyn. Drops. Drops almost five thousand feet to meet the top of a twenty two. Drum, on the other side, marks the Grand Face."

My mouth went dry as I said those two words. Dizziness hit me, blood pounded in my ears, and only Carolyn kept me from staggering. I panted for a moment, and suddenly realized this high up there was very little air.

I pointed at the side where the beautiful cone of Icsthath stopped. It seemed like part of the mountain was missing. On the other side the natural terrain of the peak marched down in stately manner to join its lesser companions. But there, the mountain simply stopped.

"That's the Grand Face," I whispered. "I'm staring at it."

Carolyn held my hand very tightly while I tried to remember how to think.

“We're going to climb Icstath?”

“Yes.”

“How?”

“That is the question you must answer,” she told me.

“Carolyn, no one's ever climbed this before. Not and lived.”

“I believe they have, but that was a very long time ago. The answers to Kuran's are on that peak, somewhere.”

I stared at it for a while, then turned and looked at her. She said the answers to Kuran's were on that peak. That means I had to climb it. To get the girl, I was going to summit the tallest mountain in the world. “We've got to!” I exclaimed.

“Yes, I know.”

“No, I mean, we've got to!” Somehow, everything was different now.

Carolyn just looked at me and nodded.

“How?” she asked.

“We take the Corillidar face up, follow that ridge line there. It shouldn't be too steep on the spine. From there we ascend until we get to that horizontal line thing. Carolyn, what's that horizontal line thing?”

“Battlements.”

I stared at her. “What?”

“The Seventh Legion fortified the peak when they came with Kuran's, a thousand years ago. The demons still hold the peak. Kuran's personal army is blocking our way.”

“That makes it harder,” I admitted.

She pointed out the lines of the fortifications. I hadn't been looking earlier, but now that she drew my attention to them, I could see them crisscrossing the slopes, blocking every path. For a millennium, the dead had entrenched, expanded, and improved their defenses around every route of ascent. They had done a very good job.

“Carolyn, the mountain's defended by an army of demons,” I observed.

“I know.”

“Do we have an army?”

“No.”

“You don't have any armies anywhere?”

“Not so much.”

“What about the bodyguards. Can they fight off an army of demons?”

“No.”

“Carolyn, I'm beginning to see why no one's ever succeeded before.”

“It will be very hard,” she agreed.

“I'm going to need some time to think about this.”

“Don't take too much. We're exposed here, and we may be hunted as we speak.”

I looked at the peak and thought about how many hours it would take for me to figure out a way up that. Then I pulled out my camera.

My camera was one of those professional grade jobs and was without a doubt the most expensive thing I owned. It was capable of taking pictures at excessive levels of detail, perfect for anal retentive image snobs, or people who occasionally needed to blow a picture up eighteen fold so they could stare at the play of light on someone's ear for half an hour, trying to get the shadows just right. Guess which group I fit in. The only reason I could afford it was my father had spent my entire inheritance on it while in the hospital and left it to me after. He had been an incorrigible old fart who'd never understood a damn thing about art, but thought that any profession required the best equipment it offered. To be honest, I think he considered spending money on medical care when he had a terminal disease absurd. After he'd bought me my camera, at some level he no longer needed to worry about money, and devoted the rest of it to fighting his sickness tooth and claw out of sheer bloody-minded stubbornness. I would rather he had spent all of the money on his treatment to begin with, but arguing with my father was about as productive as punching myself in the face with a rock.

And so, with a silent prayer of thanks to dear old Dad, I snapped away before quickly returning the camera to its insulated case.

“Let's go,” I declared.

“What about through there?” Carolyn asked. We were in her cabin, which up until this point had never been used, poring over the images of Icstath I'd taken earlier. She indicated a clear break in the gray line of ramparts that ringed the middle of the mountain. “That break is approximately a mile wide. Even without cover, we should be able to get through during the night.”

I stared at the long white expanse above the gap. “That's an avalanche field. I imagine there were once walls there, but were swept away long ago. We would be going directly up the path of least resistance. It would be suicide. Better to try the spine of Courdesense. We can run up that, go around Yordis, and

from there have an uninterrupted shot at the peak.”

“The spire of Yordis is too good of a watch point for it not to be manned. Besides, the wind comes from the south. Those spires are the only shelter on that side, which means anything living on the southern expanse probably nests there.”

“Could we evade them? Legionaries and monsters?”

“Very risky. Besides, there's no water which runs there from the Rons. We would have to hike overland from the river, possibly here. We'd be exposed the entire way.”

“Where exactly does the Rons run?” I asked.

“West. It passes between the Icstath and Gheistgerhen. Gheistgerhen stares across the river to the Grand Face.” Carolyn indicated the hints of white water that emerged in the corner of a few pictures.

I turned and stared at the pile of gear we would be forced to carry on our backs. Moving quickly would be all but impossible. I mentioned this. “If you don't think we can sneak past the watchers, we have serious problems. Acclimation, while we still can, will slow us too a crawl. We'll never outrun them.”

“What do you mean, 'while we still can?'”

“Icstath is seven miles high at the peak. There's no air up there. We'll need to carry tanks with us.”

Carolyn reached out and took my hand. “Let's say we didn't have to worry about that. Could we do it anyway?”

“Carolyn, I'm worried about air. I like breathing.”

She still had my hand. She raised it to her face, and I looked up into her eyes. “Lee, don't worry about it. You'll be fine.” Her voice was very serious and reassuring.

“Oh.”

“So, how do we do it?” she asked. I thought for a moment she was going to kiss the back of my hand, but she simply released it.

I stared at the maps for a long time. Twice I traced routes up the peak. Each ended in some guarded avenue, and I was forced to discard them. “What about this Seventh Legion? Could they be lying down on the job?”

“The commander of the seventh, under Kuranos, is Lord Varana Ariesque. He's the definition of dependable. Under him the men won't slack in their duties. You've seen the patrols they have out searching, even here.”

“But the mountain is huge,” I murmured. “He can't have the whole thing watched.”

“He's had a long time to prepare. He should know every route up and down it by now.”

“He has had plenty of time,” I agreed. I mulled over that for a while, picking through a side avenue what might let us get close enough for force of arms to carry us through when a truly stupid idea hit me. It was the worst kind of stupid idea, because it was so bad I knew it was stupid even as I basked in it. The sheer stupidity of it took my breath away, and I stared at the pictures open-mouthed. Normally angelic music plays in the background when someone has an idea this profound, but my idea was heralded in by the sound of all the choirs of heaven face-planting.

“What?” Carolyn asked.

“Well, there's always the crazy way,” I replied.

“What's the crazy way?”

“Not so much crazy as stupid. Retarded. Just plain dumb.”

“Lee?”

“We're going to climb the Grand Face. It's the one place Varana probably won't be guarding. The Rons takes us right by it. There should be pools where snow melt collects and those should link to the river. We can set off directly from the ship. All we would need to carry is climbing gear and enough food and water for-” I stopped and realized what I was suggesting. “It's impossible. We'd never be able to lug it all.”

“The climbing gear?”

“The food. Water too. As we get higher our caloric intake is going to double, and double again before we're done. By the time we get to the top we'd be eating four or five times as much a day as we are here. And it would take weeks. Possibly months.”

“Lee, let's suppose we didn't need to worry about food and water either.”

I stared at her blankly. “What?”

“Suppose I can get us around those little problems.”

“Oh,” I repeated. I guess to Carolyn eating, drinking, and breathing were little problems. “Then it's just a matter of climbing the Grand Face.”

“Is that possible? Because that's the question. Can we do it?”

“Well it's three miles tall, the highest cliff face in the world. It's about as big as big gets. And no one's ever succeeded in anything remotely like this before. But, the demons won't be watching.”

“And we wouldn't need to worry about supplies.”

I looked at her, at the pictures, and back at her. “Hell, I'm game. Let's do it.”

We sailed up the creek watching the scenery flow by. When I stared off the bow and looked at the stream I could see it was perhaps three feet wide. Directly below my perch was a thick fog that wreathed the hull of the wide, ocean vessel but gave the distinct impression of a wide river.

“Lee, don't do that,” Carolyn called from the helm.

“Do what?”

“Look down.”

“I can't help it. This should be drawing ten, twenty feet of draft and we're riding up a creek. It's amazing.”

“It's magic, but that's not the point. Every time you look down and try to see why we can't possibly be doing what we're doing the ship has to use more magic to draw a fog to prevent you. That might be visible. We don't want to be noticed.”

“Carolyn, we're sailing a galleon up a creek in the middle of a hillside!” I retorted.

“All the more reason to do it subtly.”

“We have a hundred foot mast! How subtle is that?”

“Not very, so let's not push it!” she snapped back.

I growled, exasperated, and went below.

Eventually the rocking of the ship changed. It became gentler and restrained. We must have anchored. I pulled my things together and went back above decks.

We had anchored in a small pond. There were a reeds that ringed the banks, and the water was very clear. It seemed to be only a few inches deep, but the fog was gone. It must be deep enough, I decided. Cadian and Ludus were gathering equipment on the fore deck. When I considered them I noticed the vast rock wall directly before the ship. Involuntarily my eyes followed it up.

The Grand Face stood before me. In climbing circles we talked about it like a god. Seventeen thousand feet of vertical rock, unmarred and unbroken by gullies or washes. Seventeen thousand feet of solid stone. No first ascent had ever succeeded. A few who tried had survived but only a very few. It was utterly incredible. More than three miles of flat mountain climbed above me, straight up forever. Clouds clustered around it, and I could see the cliff rise above them to be wreathed in more clouds above.

Thank you, Morpheus, I said to the god. Some might have prayed to Rhys for success, but that would not have been fitting. The Grand Face was my dream. It was perfection. It was the backdrop to my world. Ludus and Cadian were quietly preparing us for the ascent.

Again that night I didn't sleep. Instead I sat on the deck, wrapped in blankets and furs, and stared up at the night sky. It was so full of stars. I had never seen anything like it. Constellations I'd read about in books were plain as the noonday sun, while strange formations of light filled in spaces before had

always been dark. There were no clouds, no moon, and only the occasional meteor shooting across the sky moved.

“I had always wondered if it would come down to this,” Carolyn spoke. I had not noticed her behind me, but it didn't surprise me that she was here. “Us climbing the side, the impossible route to avoid detection and pursuit. Strange that our expedition has come to this.”

After that neither one of us spoke. It was along silence, the type that grew uncomfortable to some. It didn't bother me. For some reason, long silences with Carolyn never bothered me anymore. We both sank into our thoughts as the night passed us by.

“You see,” she explained, “I didn't know whether to hope for it or not. I don't know if it will be as brutal as we think. It could be suicide. But I'm not sure.” She stared into the sky for a long time. I waited. “I remember when you dove off the side and swam to that stone so you could climb it. You smiled at the rock, just before you pulled yourself out of the water. It was the most innocent, pure smile of enjoyment I've seen in years. I wish you could have painted yourself through my eyes. It's a memory I love.”

She paused, and in the dark I smiled at her. I could hear how happy she was. She was smiling when she talked, and I knew she was smiling because she was so happy to be talking to me. It meant the world.

Soon she walked over to me. She wearing only a light jacket as usual, seemingly untouched by the cold. We were on the very roof of the world, but it didn't matter. I took her hand and pulled her down until we sat, side by side, wrapped together by blankets.

“Lee,” she asked. “Do you want to do this? Climb Icstath? Do you really want to? Am I just forcing you into this?”

“Yes. This was the one thing I was born to do, Carolyn. I don't know how you're going to manage food, water, and air, but I don't care. This is destiny, and the gods will provide.”

“Destiny,” she repeated. “The gods.”

I nodded. She could feel me against her cheek, and neither one of us moved for a very long time.

“Then you will meet your fate on Icstath. It is in the hands of the gods.”

“In the hands of the gods,” I agreed.

End Chapter 8

Chapter 9

“We're going straight up,” Carolyn explained. It was the next morning. We had spent most of the night huddled together on the deck. Now she had come forward from the tiller and stood beside me. Without thinking I took her hand, threaded my fingers through hers. “This is the heart of the beast that is the Mons Messina. Monsters, demons, beasts of indescribable natures and terrible danger prowl either side of it. We have no hope. Kuranes the Seventh with half his army may not have succeeded. We must go up the bore.”