

## 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. Kuranos the Seventh with half his army may not have succeeded. We must go up the bore.”

She looked up with me. I couldn't tear my eyes away to see her face, but my periphery caught her. She stared at it like an old nemesis.

“Are you ready, Lee?”

“We should have bought more rope.”

“We will have to make do,” she replied. “I will take care of that. Can you do it?”

“If you somehow find a way past the lack of breathable air, no food, no water, murderous cold, and hundred mile an hour winds, maybe.” In daylight the task seemed vastly greater than it had last night. Perhaps that was because I could see what I was talking about.

“Done,” she replied.

I must admit, I like determined women.

“Oh, whatever then. Let's find out.”

She squeezed my fingers again and released me. We walked over to the others.

They had laid everything out very carefully. While I had learned armed and unarmed combat, they had learned how to prepare gear and anything technical I could teach them about the impending ascent. I had never expected this absurdity, of course. Still, everything was lying on the deck for me to inspect, so inspect I did.

While I was prepping everything and Ludus and Carolyn were packing, Cadian emerged with a large, black suitcase. He opened it on the deck and began assembling a strange contraption.

“What's that?” I asked.

“The DR 87. Eighty seven caliber long barreled rifle. Integrated shock absorbers to reduce the recoil, extreme distance scope for accuracy, and stopping power on par with a tank gun.” Cadian lifted a bullet from the case and showed it to me. It was an extremely complicated thing, with flairs and fins and spirally parts. It was also the size of a banana. “Each round is handmade at a cost of more than seven hundred dollars. Effective range, two point eight miles. Built for exactly one purpose.”

“What?” I exclaimed. “Dragon hunting?”

“Yes,” he replied with a smile. “It is possible something might take notice of our expedition. This will persuade them not too.”

We started at dawn.

The first day took forever. There was a crack that ran for several hundred feet straight up before terminating with the layer of rock it followed. From there I clambered up a darker stone that was harder but fractured into square segments. It was trickier, but still not terribly difficult.

The real problem was the interminable endlessness of the ascent. The second pitch went on for three hundred feet. It was easy still, but that drains the strength out of your muscles. In the end I left the ropes hooked in on a sturdy point and had myself lowered to the ship.

“Well?” Carolyn asked. She looked impatient. The other two were impassive.

I was pleased to notice Cadian had been watching the sky and me through the sniper scope. That made me feel safer.

“That's enough for today,” I told her. “I could do more, but there's no point. There's a nice anchor spot up there, and we can resume in the the morning.”

“How far did you go?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I replied with a smirk. “I barely even started.”

Carolyn shrugged. We worked out a guard roster and turned in for the night.

The next morning we began the climb. It went on, and on, and on. And then it went on some more. After that it went on, and on, and on, and on, until I slept at night without really understanding what I was doing or why. This wasn't the most technical thing I'd ever done. Most of it was pretty simple. But the sheer, inconceivable relentlessness of it became an almost human enemy of ours. I felt like some supremely spiteful creature was bearing its will against me, draining my strength and throwing the incredible absurdity of the scope of our pursuit in my face. It became unpleasantly hard because the challenge wasn't to find a way to drag myself up past the next move. The challenge was to endure the exhaustion brought on by hours upon hours of steady progress. Tension built up in my arms until they screamed, fatigue hurt my brain, and the only way to strike back was keep on clinging to the rock.

At the end of the day we stopped and harnessed a hanging tent to the cliff. It was gray, camouflaged to match the rock. Anchored against the stone, it seemed secure from the outside. Inside, the floor hung like a hammock. When I climbed in I had a moment of pure terror that it wouldn't hold. Only by exhaustion and will could I make myself release my grip on the guy lines. I sank into the dip in the bottom and forced myself to relax.

All four of us would sleep in the same pod. Our separate sleeping bags were individually anchored to the outside. While I was warming mine, Carolyn entered with a black metal goblet I'd never seen before. It was brimming with a gray fluid that smelled of earth and the dark places under rocks. She held it out to me with two hands.

“Do not take it, but drink.”

“Uh, okay,” I agreed. I placed my hands outside hers and tilted it to my lips.

I've never had anything like that before or after. It burned my lips like boiling water, filled my mouth until I couldn't breath, and forced its way down my throat of its own volition. There was a primal dominating nature to it that took control of my own motor functions from me, and I didn't know if I drank it or it simply let itself be consumed.

“Gods,” I croaked.

“The blood of the earth,” Carolyn informed me. She offered the cup to Cadian, and I was somewhat pleased to noticed he reacted to it as strongly as I had. Ludus simply drank deeply and grunted.

That night I fell unconscious like I took a brick to the head. My dreams were stranger than anything else I've ever had, mixing powerful sensations of time and movement with incredible perception. Most oddly of all I dreamed that I was a god in my own right, consumed with ancient potency, and yet bound to the earth. I was so sure I could fly if I could only leave the ground.

I woke an hour before dawn. Before the sun had made it over the mountains, we had broken down the tent, stowed everything in hanging packs to be hauled up behind us, and were ready to begin. The air was thin, and dawn came quickly. Darkness flowed down and away from the sunlight like a tide. As soon as the shadows melted away we climbed.

After that I did not eat or drink for nine days. No one else did either. We barely spoke, communicating in quiet grunts. On the third day I told Cadian to leave the tents secure, instead of bringing them with us. He nodded, glanced up the slope and understood that it would be a day on a vicious rock face. He nodded once, and those were the last words either of us spoke for almost a week. I noticed the reticence to talk in me, and wondered about it, but I didn't care enough to say anything. I think Cadian felt the same. Ludus was unchanged. I didn't know about Carolyn.

Eventually, one afternoon, I stood with my feet in a crack, leaning back away from the mountain with my weight on the belay line. Carolyn was a few feet behind me, waiting.

“Do you have any water with you?” I asked without preamble. We were at a tricky bit, and I had been trying to figure out an easy route. The sensation of thirst caught me by surprise.

“Yes,” she replied. Her voice sounded cautious. She passed me a small bottle, and I wet my lips and mouth. I gave it back to her without another word.

Shortly after that, she told me to stop. “Can you anchor yourself there?”

I nodded.

“Good. Come down so you're next to me. Watch this very carefully.”

Carolyn was hunched on an oddly blue tinted section of rock. She licked bother her thumbs, and then began to draw an odd pattern. First was an outer circle, then an inner circle, and asymmetrical radial lines connecting them. Around this went some very odd patterns, resembling branching lines, but giving the impression of curvature. She licked her thumbs again and placed them side by side at the top

of the inner circle. She drew them down, parting the thin line of saliva and then back together, and connected the lines at the bottom of the circle.

“Open,” she murmured.

The rock did. It parted cleanly along wet streak, opening like lips. Carolyn reached inside and withdrew the strange steel chalice she had offered me before. It was again filled with a fluid dark as night, with a smell like caves.

“Drink again. If you thirst for water, you need a more potent beverage.”

“I can't get hooked on this stuff, can I?” I asked.

“No more so than water. Drink it. It will protect you from the cold, hunger and thirst, and the thinning air. Drink deeply, and climb.”

I thought about food and water, and the faint sensation of cold that seemed remote. I lifted her hands to my lips and drank deeply. It was too late for doubts.

When I recovered from that draught she had replaced the cup and made all makes of it's presence disappear. Inside me, the hot beverage burned in my stomach, and I couldn't concentrate on anything but the command she had given me. It was what I wanted to do anyway. I climbed until the last shred of light was gone, and would have kept going if the others had not held onto my torso and stopped me.

About seven thousand feet into the ascent we hit a spot of brutal rock. The holds were small and treacherous. Ludus had been leading up to that point, but after struggling for a while with one murderous move he signaled down to me. I joined him. The silencing effects of our diet had worn off, and we could talk now, though we still spoke little. Ludus spoke slightly more, oddly enough. He still wasn't very talkative.

“It is impossible,” he grunted. “There is nothing to grab.”

“Don't worry about it. Let me see what I can do.”

Well, I concluded silently, you certainly found one SOB of a section. I took a wide detour along an expanse that had all the holds of an plaster wall and found another route. About fifteen feet of that left me back where I started, only a little higher. I anchored, spidered up another dozen feet, and anchored again. It was murder.

“Lee,” Carlyn's voice whispered very softly in my ear. We had hands-free radios for just such an occasion. “Stop moving and hold on very, very tightly.”

I grunted. Her request did not make much sense since I was already clinging to the face so closely it seemed we were spooning. I knotted my fingers on the stone and considered a small notch ahead of me.

There was a crack like thunder. A tremendous suction tried to yank me free of the mountain. It tore my fingers and me into the open air. There was a moment of weightlessness while I stayed connected to the

stone only by my fingertips as I hung almost horizontal out in space. I crashed back into the mountain, bounced once, and lost my grip to tumble down the side. My belt cinched tight, halting me upside down. I swung and kicked to get back upright. This part of the mountain had only slight holds that resisted my bloody fingers as they tried to find a purchase. I scrambled, kicking furiously, trying to get purchase when a great drop of black blood splattered down on my hand. I froze, and then very carefully looked up.

About twenty feet above my head were the immense jaws of a beast that dwarfed a hippopotamus. It had to weigh a more than a car. The teeth on that thing were longer than my hand. Thick scales covered it's multitude of hands, but left strange foot pads free to cling the stone. The only other place that wasn't heavily armored was the center of its forehead. There was only a bloody hole there.

“What the-”

It grunted, gurgled, and admitted to itself it was dead. Majestically it tumbled free into the sea of air and descended thousands of feet to the rocky earth below in a stately dive. I think I stopped breathing.

“All clear,” Carolyn said over the radio. This time her voice was normal and nonchalant. “You can keep going.”

“Oh. Good,” I gasped.

I think I wet myself. I'm not sure.

“Be careful,” observed Cadian blandly. “They can be very dangerous.”

They pulled me up to the last anchor point. The passage of the bullet had torn pebbles free from the mountain, creating a space for me to stand. After reassuring myself that the monster had no friends in the area I inspected my fingers tips. They were cut, but the callouses had not been torn off. Some nontoxic epoxy closed the injuries, and I hunched down while I waited for it to set.

“Multiple contacts, six o'clock,” Ludus said calmly over the radio.

“Probably attracted by the noise. Cadian, engage,” Carolyn ordered.

I whirled to try to see what was at six o'clock. Several black specs, perhaps half a dozen, were moving across an open expanse of sky towards us.

“Oh-” I began.

There was another retort like thunder. A second later one of the specs exploded in a geyser of black that dissipated in the distance.

“shit?” I belatedly finished.

“Engaging, aye,” Cadian reported. I peered down. He was methodically reloading, saving the spent casings.

Like a surgeon he blew them out of the air. After the third died the other three wheeled about and

scattered, but it did them no good. None made it away.

“Lee, we need to find cover,” Carolyn informed me. “If there's a cave or crevasse, or anything where we can hide, make for that.”

The rock surface was a uniform color here, but off to my right was a black patch. Little bits of white peppered the bottom of the patch like a beard. It was possible water had gotten into a crack in the rock and frozen, breaking free a boulder to leave a cave.

With Ludus right behind me I began to traverse towards it. I was suddenly very lonely up here and liked the company. Especially the company of someone given to extreme violence on the part of my safety.

The dark spot was indeed an indentation. We approached it from the top and could not accurately make out its depth, but guessed it to be at least three or four feet. Our entire group could huddle in there. I set another anchor point.

“Ludus, go look inside. See if the cave is safe,” Carolyn ordered. She and Cadian were watching from the other camp. If we sheltered here we would actually lose elevation, but there was no help for it.

Ludus and I switched places, and he lowered himself down to the opening. He disappeared within.

We waited several intense seconds.

“Well?” demanded Carolyn. “Is it safe?”

“No,” he replied.

Something roared, deep and long, from a throat that was both wide and terrible. Claws scraped stone. An tremendous impact cracked, knocking me about where I stood. I had to dance with the rope to keep my perch.

“Little help!” I called out.

“Coming.” Cadian was already scrambling hand over hand up the line.

There was a series of crashes, crunches, the snap of splintering bone, and another deep roar. This one was even more horrible than the first. Unlike the cry of a beast this managed to convey an articulate fury. Another deep reverberation shook the mountainside. A boulder the size of Carolyn's car shot from the cave mouth like a spat watermelon seed.

“Now he's pissed it off,” Cadian observed.

I stared down at the dark opening. I couldn't see anything, and the sounds were confused. There were pounding noises, scraping, an inorganic shriek, and suddenly an incredibly human exclamation.

“Ow!” bellowed Ludus over the radio.

There was another series of concussions, even more violent than before.

“Oh, now it's pissed him off,” Cadian answered himself. He was almost to me, having left the great rifle behind in favor of a stubby machine pistol.

There was another earthshaking bellow, three violent cracks, and then silence.

The two of us exchanged a look. Cadian had brought a short bit of rope with him, and we tied that off. He bounded down until he was beside the opening. I inverted myself and slithered after him. In unison he came in from the side as my head peaked below the roof.

Ludus stood in the center of a large circular room. He was covered in blood, held a shattered knife in his left hand, and was panting deep furious gulps. I stared at him quietly, waiting for him to say anything.

“I got one,” Ludus concluded at the end of a long silence.

One was a scaled juggernaut of astounding size, now lying still in the grotto. It's bulk took up most of the open space. It's body was destroyed. Hideous wounds marred its flanks and skull. Splintered bits of teeth and claw dangled from its mouth. One of its eyes was completely removed. The eyeball in question dangled from Ludus's chin. Bits of the optic nerves seemed to be entangled in his teeth.

“You did. You definitely did,” Cadian reassured him.

Ludus considered him, then me, and then the beast. We waited in silence as he chose his words carefully.

“I'm never doing that again,” he concluded.

Cadian nodded.

Ludus frowned. His impassive mask was slipping back down, but not before he sneered at the creature one last time and kicked it spitefully in the side. Then he grimaced and sat before he collapsed.

“Carolyn, it's safe,” I reported over the radio.

I righted myself and ascended a moment to consider everything.

These guys are monsters! I thought.

We dumped the body and reclaimed all our ropes. When creatures began to fly around, investigating the noises and smells, we had already removed all traces of our presence.

The cave was a crack in the mountain, tall and narrow, perhaps five feet wide at the mouth. It twisted to being wide and level with a low ceiling deeper in the mountain. After searching the limits of it with flashlights and finding nothing, we huddled at the back. Several winged beasts flapped about the opening and a couple stuck their snouts in. None of them made a concerted effort to enter.

Among the stones of the next part of our ascent roosted thick bodied black birds. Every day before daylight crept over the distant ridges they hurled themselves from the cliff to catch the air and soar away below us. Sometimes I watched them while I waited for the light. They congregated around the Rons before dispersing to all corners of the basin. There must be food for them among the trees and marshes, but in this barren land I could not imagine what it would be. Larger black shapes sometimes dove among the flocks, scattering them. The bigger birds, those that had sought us after Ludus has killed the cliff beast, lacked their prey, and could only hunt by plunging into the midst of a pack of them while they rested on the ground. They never bothered us on the face.

Carolyn fed me from another chalice of the strange dark mountain's blood. Though I drank and only a small sip at that, it sustained me without even phantom pains of hunger.

"It's too potent for your body," Carolyn explained. "It overloads your senses. That's why you have to be careful to only drink a small amount."

"What is it doing to me?" I asked. It had been three days since I'd sipped the strange brew. It took that long to recover from drinking it to the point I could bring myself to talk.

"Sustaining you," she replied. "Like it sustains all of us. It will drive your body onwards, in spite of little food or water. Even air is minor next to the pure motive power of the blood of the earth. Have you noticed the cold?"

"Sometimes," I told her. "It's hard to remember the feeling of being cold. Sometimes I find myself wondering what that the sensation is when a wind from the peaks cuts across me. Other times I can't remember what cold feels like."

Carolyn nodded to me. "The cold tries to kill by stopping your body. The earthblood won't let you stop moving. It's the same with air. Your body needs air to keep moving, and you must keep moving, so your body is forced to adapt to the altitude."

"But why can't I talk?"

"Because the need to keep moving is too strong some times," she explained. "In someone who isn't used to an elemental drive like this, it overshadows your mind."

"Does it do the same to you?" I asked. Carolyn had been unusually quiet for the entire climb.

"Somewhat. But my drives and motivations are old and deep, and the earthblood can do little to affect them. Cadian, you notice, gasps when he drinks like you do."

I nodded in agreement. "And I can't tell the difference between Ludus unusually quiet and Ludus unusually talkative."

"We'll all get by," she reassured me. "We're making good progress after all."

"We should be," I told her. "This is the easy part."

Carolyn blinked. "The easy part?"

“Yeah. We're below the level of most precipitation bearing clouds, so freezing rain or snow can still pit the rock. Water gets into those pits, freezes, and leaves us handholds. When we get higher, we'll pass through the cloud region. There the stone should be ice covered and slick. Beyond that, above where the cutting snow normally falls, the face will be even smoother. Also, the holds will get polished by high winds. It'll get a lot trickier.”

“Will you be able to do it?”

“Don't know.” I replied with a shrug. “No one's ever done it before, but we're here so we may as well keep trying.”

I looked up the rock face and glanced over it, examining what we would have to pass today. The sun had almost cleared the ridge behind me, throwing light across the great basin. Climbing with the sun at your back was the best way to go. There was a little nubbin of shadow right above my head, and I poked it experimentally.

“I guess we should get started then. Daylight's wasting.”

We picked a way past the nesting level of the birds. Some small plants grew in notches fertilized with droppings. These were few and far between though. The air was thin up here.

Later we got the snow storm we were all expecting. We huddled in our pod for two days as winds strained against guy wires as the storm tried to tear us from the cliff. By the end of the first day the shrieking winds had grown so constant I started trying to find a tune in their wailing to divert my attention from being stationary. Oddly enough, it was easy to find. The gusts wailed in simple harmony, and I drifted off to sleep to Icstath's lullaby. In the morning I caught myself humming along.

After the weather abated, the Grand Face was white with frost. We waited two hours after dawn, but the sun did little to thaw our way.

“How long till this melts?” Carolyn asked me.

“A few days, maybe. Unless we get another one. And at least a day after that for the stone to dry.”

She stared up the cliff impassively. Gears were whirling in her head, and her breathing was slow and regular like a clock. Caught by sudden impulse, I traced a rude image of her in the hoarfrost. It tickled my fingers.

“So three days before we can continue?” she concluded. “That's an awful risk. We're the only thing for a thousand feet that isn't snow white.”

I wasn't really paying attention to her, more concerned with the few lines that managed to convey the impression of her face. When it was done I mashed my palm to the rock to sign it, and laughed as flurries drifted from my hand.

“Oh, I never said that. Just that be a few days before it was dry.”

I looked over at Carolyn and smirked at her. She raised one eyebrow questioning. I reached up, grabbed an icicle that ran along the stone and pinched it. Squeezing it between two fingers, I rolled my weight

up and caught another icicle with my other hand. They ran straight up the stone like rails. Pressing out with my toes and pulling together with my hands, I resumed my ascent.

“Cold can't hurt us, remember? But you probably don't want to be directly below me unless the earthblood protects you from falling ice. I'll find a belay station and you can come up that way.”

Carolyn said nothing as I spidered up the ice. Soon I wouldn't have been able to hear her if she did. Humming the song of the Norad winds in my head I continued doing what I came here to do, climbing the Grand Face.

I climbed until I got to long term ice. The stone was pale gray here, and stayed cold enough that the ice would cling to it for weeks. Unlike the mostly cosmetic dusting below, this was thick enough to disguise the texture of the stone beneath, but too thin to use true ice climbing techniques. I reveled in my immunity to the cold. It let me work my fingers into the surface of the ice. Frozen raindrops protruded from the otherwise flat surface, giving me texture. Holding onto almost nothing, I kept going until I ran out of rope.

“How are you guys doing down there?” I asked on the radio. All I heard in reply was static. I tried a number of channels, but couldn't make contact. I looked down.

Vertigo nearly killed me. Far below me another cloud bank met the cliff. All sense of perspective was gone. Suddenly it seemed like I was lying prone on a vast flat plain. I jerked my head back forward, and clenched my hands, clawing for better holds. I panicked and hyperventilated.

The ice didn't have better holds. It required a level of finesse that my fear crazed mind didn't allow. I fingers tore through the ice, sending splintering spiderwebs of cracks out. My fear fogged brain realized what was happening as the entire side of the cliff disintegrated. Dinner plate sized sheets of frost tumbled from the mountain, including the one I'd been holding onto.

I had to move. I kicked and pushed against falling shingles of frost, scrambling upwards. It seemed like I was moving through an avalanche. With a great crackling, a huge fragment above me tore loose and slid down, splintering into a million little razors.

I yanked and jumped. For ten thousand years in my head, I let go of the rock with both hands and both feet. I was completely detached, hoping I'd thrown myself more upwards than out. Before me, the cliff tumbled and thundered down. I hung in space, watching the ice rush past me for so long that I suddenly wondered why I hadn't fallen yet and got bored waiting for the terrible lurch that would precede my final descent. Then I noticed my arms were still swinging in the first windmill. I'd been off the rock for maybe a tenth of a second. I stabbed my hand forward and caught the crack that had held all the plate frost. I got at least two full knuckles of my index finger into it. My body fell and yanked against my shoulder.

Then everything was silent. Winds caught the falling frost, and sucked it away from the cliff. I hung for a while, trying to get my breathing under control. Every time I exhaled I swung away from the side and bounced back. It was a little nerve wracking.

Eventually I calmed. I set up a hex nut, tied myself off, and waved to everyone below keeping my eyes on the cliff. Suddenly elated that death had missed me, I finished humming the line of the wind song I'd

been on before.

Every bit of ice within two hundred feet on my left shrieked and tore free of the mountain. The wind had carried the tune down and along the side, and in that direction was now hundreds of feet of bare mountain. Crackling and tumbling down below, the frozen rain vanished into the clouds and disappeared.

The song, sung by the mountain winds in a storm, had tried to kill me. That realization hit me with tangible force. If there had been an updraft, the music would have been carried above me up the mountain, and then I would have died. The mountain itself was trying to kill me.

The others came up to meet me. Carolyn asked, "What happened? I thought the entire cliff was going to come off at one point."

"Carolyn, the mountain tried to kill me."

She blinked. "Explain, please."

"I got bored during the snowstorm and tried to put it to music. Now I've got that song caught in my head. If I hum it, it causes an avalanche."

"Don't hum it," she told me seriously.

"Thanks," I replied acidly. "I'll keep that in mind."

"It's called a siren song. Icstath might not be trying to kill you, but that song may be from the demon legions of Kuranos, or perhaps simply some other old power that has hid here in the high places of the earth. And perhaps it is Icstath. Take it very seriously. There are things here that do not want to be found. They may attack you through music."

"Music?" I couldn't really believe her.

"Music is old and powerful. Before there was language, there was music, and a great many things that no longer walk the earth know music as their mother tongue. Be careful, Lee. There are things here that may want you dead."

"Then why don't they just strike me with lightning?"

"They tore the side of the mountain you were on from the cliff and cast it into air. That's pretty thorough."

"But I survived."

"I know." She winked at me. "But they won't underestimate you again."

Now that I thought about it, I didn't really think they had underestimated me. That really should have worked.

"Wow," I understated.

“Try not to worry about it,” Carolyn told me. We were hanging in our harnesses, feet on the cliff with hands free. She put her hand on the back of my neck and massaged it a few times. I looked at her like she was crazy. The tune caught in my head might attempt to murder me and I shouldn't worry about it?

“That's insane,” I concluded.

“The Mons Messina are the Mountains of Madness, Lee. That's what the name means. It's only going to get worse. But in the future, tell me any of these little things. I'll try to deal with them so you can focus on the climb.”

“My brain hurts.”

She patted me on the head. I returned to the mountain.

Soon we came to a part I began to think of as the Murder. It was evil, viciously hard. Holds were small and treacherous. Sometimes notches in stone would be just deep enough to hide black ice that crumbled under my fingers. Vast expanses would be smoother than concrete, requiring either long, detours or maddeningly slow, meticulous progress. Before the others would lead occasionally to give me a rest, but now I was always ahead. My fingertips bled and healed and bled again. I went through chalk like water.

Most of the time I worked about fifty to a hundred feet ahead of the others. Too often a route ended in unnatural, glass like smoothness and I would have to downclimb dozens of feet to try to find a new way. As we got higher, the granite inexplicably became laced with loose shale, usually under a thin dusting of snow to conceal the difference in color and texture. The shale crumbled under any weight. It made no sense.

Unless, of course, someone intentionally laid this out to be the hardest climb possible. Paranoia set in. I began to wonder how I would trap holds if I could. What could be done to make them even more dangerous? Soon I was playing mind games against the rock and thought I must be losing my mind. But the memory of the song stayed with me. Something was trying to stop me.

That being said, I'm one amazingly stubborn idiot. Besides, I certainly couldn't go down. Descending is always a lot harder than going up. We had to be more than a mile up now.

One day something bit me. I was picking my way along when the rock opened up like a trap door and before I could figure out what was happening, a small mouth with dozens of razors for teeth shot out and lanced my forearm. I jerked back, surprised, and yanked my arm away.

A snakelike neck extended from a hole in the stone, and the head remained attached to my forearm. The sudden movement weakened my grip, and I slid a foot downward. I couldn't keep a grip with one hand and left five long bloody finger marks on the stone as I slid. I was more than a hundred feet from my last anchor point, searching the weak rock for any pit strong enough to serve. If I fell I'd drop twice that, plus the flex in the rope, and that's only if my last anchor point held, something I wasn't sure about.

With a hiss I clenched my fingers on the bloody rock, stopped my descent. I twisted my hand around to grab the biter by the neck. I yanked like hell, and most of the thing came free from the hole it had hid in with a tearing of flesh and sinew. I beat it against the rock until it let go and tossed it away behind me. Its hole made an excellent, if disgusting, anchor spot.

The thing had covered its hole with a silk-like trapdoor. Some spiders did that, but reptiles? Only on Icstath, probably.

“Be careful come up. There are biters in the rock!” I yelled over my shoulder. The radios hadn't worked in days.

“What's a biter?” Carolyn yelled back.

“That thing.”

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I'm fine. Put some tension on the rope for a minute.”

When Cadian's weight was counterbalancing mine, I leaned away from the rock and checked myself. The teeth marks weren't very wide, but they were pretty deep. Also, the slide had torn all the callouses from my other hand. Muttering to myself I started super gluing my hands back together. My blood looked extremely thick and dark, more purple than red. I wondered if that was an effect of the altitude. Fortunately I wasn't bleeding badly.

We wound up staying there for the evening. Cadian and Ludus bounded around the rock face, hanging by their repelling lines, searching the area for more of the biters. They found dozens. Forewarned, they systematically tore them from their holes and cast the bodies away. The nests they sanitized with fire. I slept deeply in the pod, letting myself heal. Cadian said he would wake me up for my shift at guard duty, but when he did it was morning.

“Have you been awake all night?” I asked.

“Not really. The three of us traded off,” he shrugged.

“Now I feel guilty. You should let me take my turn.”

“Sure,” he agreed. With that he leaned out the tent and point straight up the rock face. “That's your turn. Get to it.”

Cadian, I was beginning to realize, was a very intelligent man. Because he spoke so little he never said anything dumb. A long time ago he'd said to me, 'A fool and sage say the same thing with their mouths shut.' But a fool would never think of that.

I returned to the Murder. It was every bit as fun as I expected. Winged beasts came for us again. We feared to use guns for the noise, but the two bodyguards had several wide-bladed throwing knives. Scaled and feathered creatures fell at me from the skies, and knives took them in the eyes and throat. One simply refused to die until Ludus stuck his arm down its throat and ripped its brain out.

We kept climbing.

After a while I lost track of time. Days blurred together. For a while I tried to distinguish the passage of time by elevation, but clouds below us blocked the view of the ground too frequently. Carolyn offered me the black fluid when I needed it, and my sips grew deeper. Icstath got harder as well, but I was learning the rhythm of its attacks. I knew when to look for the mountain's treachery.

Sections of the Grand Face lean out slightly. Some have vast overhangs that extend further than anything should. There were sections of the mountain that jutted so far into empty space that it seemed like I was clinging to a stone ceiling. The shadow of the mountain kept the route dark. The stone was black, and it was difficult to see the way.

Everything I've told you about I did again. The storms, the weather, the beasts and of course the maliciously difficult sections of rock all came once more, and then again as I steadily dragged the party up the interminable cliff. At one point the mountain dropped every pretense of subtlety as well as a million tons of rock. An avalanche of snow and stone tore free of the mountain directly above us, and it seemed the entire world was crashing down.

I dropped two hundred feet down a belay rope, grabbed a free line and handed Ludus the other end. He understood. The I swan dove off the side as bit of stone buckled above, the precursors to the fall. Ludus played the line through his hands just slow enough that I wasn't in true free fall. I came to one of the overhangs that had been almost impossible before. By memory I backtracked under it, yanked the cord twice, and the others came down after me. Behind them came the wrath of the mountain.

In the silence as thunderous as the passing landslide, Carolyn asked me, "Lee, have you been singing again?"

I looked up from the rock still tumbling into the clouds below and laughed. "That was not my fault!"

She looked at me suspiciously. The other three were in harnesses, linked to a single anchor above us, while I was dangling from my hands and feet. I extended my arms until our faces were only inches away and winked at her. "Promise."

She reached out and caressed my inverted face. If she hadn't I would have leaned in and kissed her right then, the bodyguards watching or not. But instead I rubbed against her hand as she traced the contours of my nose and eyebrow.

"Come, Lee. Let's finish this. I want this to end."

I climbed out past the lip, and set off again.

"How far?" Carolyn asked.

I stood up with my feet against rock, leaning out over nothing. I stared for a while at the stone ahead, noticing different bits of color that wound through the dark gray. It amazed me how many different colors of gray existed with the slab above. For a while it held my gaze.

“Not very. One final pitch should do it.” I looked at the shadow under my feet. It was a little ball of darkness. If it was noon, the sun would be directly over head. Now it was just clearing the mountains at my back. I decided suddenly. “We'll finish this now.”

“Very well,” Carolyn accepted easily. “Cadian, move twenty yards right. Lee, Ludus will follow you.”

“No,” I said very quietly. “He won't. He will stay here with you. I'll do this.”

Carolyn looked at me carefully. She was also hanging off a single rope from her waist to the anchor point. We stood with our heads point out into the air. Sometimes I got vertigo, looking behind me and seeing a flat plane of stone that wandered forever to disappear in the clouds. It was easy to forget which way was up.

“The Grand Face?” she asked.

“I want the last bit of it.”

Carolyn nodded. We exchanged a few bits of equipment.

“Do you think it will be hard?”

I smiled at her. “Nothing can stop me now.”

Nothing could. I grabbed a final bit of rock, heaved myself forwards, and rolled on the smooth flat stone, polished by a thousand thousand years of ice and snow. Everything was absolutely still.

To the south of me was a vast open area. It was the half-basin of Icstath, the depression between the errant ridges of the Mons Messina, which wandered about the great northern subcontinent in random patterns. I shifted myself to sit on the lip, let my feet dangle in the open air, and leaned back on my elbows to consider where I had come.

There was power here. Pure, brutal, unbelievable power of a magnitude I'd always imagined necessary to the natural world but had never seen. Again and again in waves the sudden understanding that titanic forces had come together with relentless purpose to create this edifice. Icstath was an intentional creation of the powers of the earth. It was an artifact that had been completed in a single act of self justifying creation that was so complete in and of itself it didn't need to pay any attention to what came after. Kuranos, long dead king of Phi, and Desian the Terror, Carolyn, Varana with his Seventh Legion, all had come here to simply use bits of this place of power. But Icstath itself didn't care. It had the capacity to, but didn't. Icstath was, like an elemental or god, and that action, being, consumed it. All of it's inconceivable power was caught up in it. I wondered if it was sentient in anyway I could imagine. The doctors and physicians of Celephais would laugh at the thought, but for that reason it didn't surprise me that none of them had ever ascended this point. They wouldn't have the right attitude to do it.

I thought for a while of the mountains of Nirmo. The tallest peak there was about on par with my feet now. Each had been climbed many times. The climbs were still dangerous, and people died trying, but it was a worn, experienced danger. Climbing the greats of Nirmo was like racing motorcycles or leaping out of planes. Many people had done it before you, but there was always a chance you would become a statistic to warn future climbers of the seriousness of the undertaking. Icstath would probably

never become that. Its power disrupted the patterns men used to make themselves safe. I wondered if it was itself a chaotic being.

As an afterthought, I found a crevice and placed an anchor point. I doubled that for safety's sake, and tugged a couple times on the ropes to be sure they were set securely. It would be absurd for one of the climbers behind me to fall after coming this far. Still, I was the only one yet who had achieved any true safety, standing now on solid ground. I felt a ping of fear. I double anchored the ropes, and tapped the radio to signal they could follow. Soon they were with me. I smiled at Carolyn when we were all past the dangerous part and relaxed.

“Ah, Lee,” she whispered. Her hands played with my hair. “You finished it. The Grand Face. You climbed every bit of it.”

“I know.” I glanced back over the edge and stared down into a rolling white snowstorm. Clouds boiled and frothed, but so far beneath that the air I overlooked was clear. We were standing by the edge, but the past months had cured us of any fear of heights. I thought I was immortal. “It was my life's dream, you know? This one thing I secretly wished I could do. I used to think that if I could be the first person to climb the Grand Face I could have everything.” I glanced back at her. She was still twiddling with a strand of hair behind my ear.

“Do you feel like your life is complete now?”

I smiled. “Yes, I do.”

“Good,” she replied. “That makes it easier, at least.” And for the first time she kissed me. Her lips were incredibly soft and warm on mine.

When she pulled back I looked at her face and suddenly saw her as I hadn't since we'd first met. Under her control and strength she was achingly sad. Sadness was leaking out of her, between the fingers of her mind's grasp, and every bit of it fell on me like the rain.

“Why?” I begged. There were so many questions in that one word I didn't know how to finish.

Her hand touched the side of my neck then withdrew. She tightened up her mask and said, “Because I played you, Lee, like a drum.”

And then she kicked me in the chest. The shock of it was so hard and I was still so caught up in her face that I didn't even realize what was happening until my body flew over the edge. Time stopped. I had one eternal look at her, leg extended, face regal, flanked by Cadian and Ludus as the white snow behind her rose up to the peak of Mons Icstath. Then I had fallen past the lip and into seventeen thousand feet of open air.

End Chapter 9