

Chapter 5

After seeing the bodies, Mercy and Asher's faces went through some rapid contortions before they could get their opinions stuffed right back down to wherever they were bubbling up from.

Orphia was up on the wall still. Pretending to keep watch, but glancing at us from the periphery of her vision each time that her head turned. A hint of a smile twisting at the side of her mouth. I had absolutely no doubt that she was the one that had organized the hanging gardens of the Bastion display for us. Just as I had no doubt that it was to make us act out. To start a fight.

Every part of me was screaming out to do just that. When I see evil, I hit it. That is what I do.

This right here, this was evil. I could feel the urge to draw my sword building up inside me like a scream. How many more of them would die if I reached for it? How many of them would throw themselves between me and Leofric, even when he did stuff like this to them?

Asher could see it on my face when he looked back to me, Mercy didn't even have to look. She was already reaching down to grab my wrist. From a distance it might have looked like she was in shock and seeking comfort. Orphia probably thought it was a sign that Mercy was weak.

She was holding onto me with all her strength. Stopping me for reaching up and pulling this whole castle down on our heads. When Asher's eyes flicked down to observe that, he latched on to my other arm.

On the one hand, I appreciated the group hug, but on the other, I was kind of annoyed that they thought I wouldn't be able to control myself.

It wasn't like I was berserk. It wasn't like my blood was boiling, and that smug bastard was just a step away. It wasn't like I could rip him in half with my bare hands.

Asher was hanging off horizontally off my arm by the time I noticed that I was reaching for my sword, and Mercy's arms were shaking with the effort of keeping my other hand pinned at my side. The look of blind panic on her face was enough to snap me out of it.

For a moment everything was quiet, then it was like all the sound of the world suddenly came back. Whatever dark place my thinking parts had wandered off to let go on their hold and I was here again. Back in Amaranth. Looking down at Leofric as he looked genuinely puzzled. "Those fools who would have done you harm have now left my service, and those who remain shall treat you with the proper respect."

Even now that the wave of fury had passed, I couldn't bring myself to say the words that he wanted, so it was poor Mercy who had to step forward and say, "Thank you."

The rest of our very civilized evening passed in a blur. Leofric seemed to sense that he'd made some misstep, even if he didn't know exactly what it was, so he made a great show of sitting us down with his troops for their evening meal, sharing his own much finer food with them freely. It probably would have been a grander gesture if we didn't know that Eternals didn't need to eat, but even with all of his generosity, most of the gaunt men and women gathered around the fire ate little.

Too overwhelmed by the presence of Eternals in their midst to do much more than stare. I hated it. I hated being put up on a pedestal by these people who'd clearly tried way harder than me to get to where they were, just because I was born into these powers. Mercy and Asher took it in stride, I suppose that Mercy got a good amount of this sort of fawning from her little Dvergar fan-club back home, but all I could think about was the fact that somebody had made these people this way. Somebody had found them and taught them that they owed us awe.

All I had to do was look across the fire to know who that was. Leofric sat there with Orphia at his right hand. Her injuries had vanished sometime between our arrival back at this patch of wall and dinner, so that meant that either they had some wizard on staff with healing powers, which seemed unlikely given the lack of any indication that anyone nowadays could do magic, or, more likely that Leofric had some Primal healing powers like me.

That one made sense. It fitted in nicely with his benevolent holy overlord if he could lay hands on people and heal them. It was a handy miracle to whip out when you wanted to impress.

All that it had impressed on me was the fact that he could have healed her at any moment since the end of the fight, and instead he left her limping around with half her face mashed in, to make a point. To remind her that he controlled everything, even her suffering. What a dick.

Mercy and Asher shared a few stories from our travels to widespread applause, but they were pretty careful to sidestep around any of the major events, like the Alvaren coming back, or Talon's death, or us having a tidy little stack of Rusted Blade shards. It was nice that they were taking my warnings about Leofric being a bad guy a little bit seriously, even if they were still laughing at his jokes and drinking his beer. Okay that was mostly Mercy. She made my drinking look like a healthy habit. Of course, with the poison resistance I'd developed from enough Dvergar parties, this stuff was like water to me anyway.

Despite the corpses of their companions swinging in the night breeze just down-wind of us, the rest of the soldiers seemed to be close to ecstatic now that we'd arrived. None of them dared to say anything outright, but from the dark glances that they sent in Orphia's direction when she wasn't paying attention, I got the impression that she wasn't very well liked by the folks under her command, and they were looking for us to take her place in whatever hierarchy Leofric had cobbled together.

Mercy getting blind drunk actually gave us the perfect excuse to duck out of the celebrations early. All the way back along to our rooms, she was belching out something like a marching rhythm. Even when she was sober she was like this, so it wasn't a huge surprise, but by the end of the walk to our quarters, I was carrying her over one shoulder as she sang something in Dvergar that it is probably for the best that I don't translate. There were a lot of euphemisms. Lots of things that were as hard as rock. The soldiers escorting us were blushing. The downside of speaking in tongues. Everyone knew what we were singing.

Asher eased the door shut in the face of our escort with a lot of apologies about her behavior and he looked genuinely surprised when he turned back to the room and realized she was standing for herself and stone-cold sober. He opened his mouth, but the finger she held pressed up to her lips silenced him before he gave the little deception away. We all snuck upstairs.

Mercy was the first to lay her cards on the table. "Okay, so maybe he is a bit of a bad guy."

Oh great, a concession. That was so helpful now that we were in the belly of the beast. "And you signed me up to be his assassin."

She at least had the good grace to look crestfallen. "Look, he's a bad guy, so maybe whoever is in charge of the Faun is a good guy? It makes sense, right?"

"I can't imagine the Faun leader is any worse than golden boy. But what about all the stuff about him being a servant of the Voidgod?"

"Pretty sure anyone that doesn't agree with old Leo is a servant of the Voidgod." Mercy scoffed, "Shine his shiny booties wrong? Must have been the Voidgod's fault."

Asher had watched all of this pass between the two of us in silence, his expression puzzled. "He does not seem to me better or worse than any other king. Perhaps the two of you simply hold all in Amaranth to a higher standard than you did your own rulers?"

That actually shut me up for a second as I thought it through.

Mercy rolled her eyes, "We didn't have kings Asher. We had..." She slowed her roll for a moment as she tried to put it into words he might understand. She glanced at me for support, "...Politicians?"

"People born with too much money, who told everyone else what to do." I grumbled. "Not much of a difference between that and a king, is there?"

In the rarest of rare moments, Mercy shut up. She stood there and made no noise and Asher and I both had enough time to take a breath. Eventually I was the one who broke the silence. "Look, if it was up to me, I'd just hit him a lot and take his sword, but you think there is a better way to do this and I trust you. Just tell me what to do. Tell me how to be sneaky or make friends with assholes or whatever."

"Okay, well stop calling him an asshole, to start with." She was trying not to laugh but it was escaping in little snorts.

"Never going to stop calling him an asshole. Step two?"

"Laugh at his jokes. Smile." She forced her own face into a grimace. "Act like you think he's right. Even if he isn't right. Especially if he isn't right."

Asher's head cocked to one side. "May I ask where you learned all of this subterfuge?"

"Have you ever dated a man?"

I'm sure that was meant to be some sort of feminist mic drop moment for her but I'm a big believer in honesty. "Yup. I mean, I didn't find out it was a date until the end, but yeah."

The wind was taken right out of Mercy's sails, and I almost felt bad for her. Almost. Then Asher piped up, "Will it be necessary for Maulkin to 'make out' with Leofric. If we recognize it as the best way to assure others of friendship."

Just like that, the grimace grin was back on Mercy's face.

I backed away from her slowly. "I would really like to not."

"No, no..." She said. "I like where this is going."

Holding up my hands in defeat, I tried not to shudder at the image of Leo making smoochy faces.

"Okay... How about we never speak about making out ever again."

Mercy raised an eyebrow. "So the bet..."

"What bet? I don't remember any bet." I backpedaled my way to the door. "Let's go to sleep. I've got to suck up to fantasy-land Mussolini tomorrow."

Asher was still standing there, head tilted to one side. "I do not understand that reference."

Mercy snorted. "I'm surprised Maulkin understood that reference."

"We had the history channel." Then I added. "Shut up."

I left the two of them to it. Even through the closed door I could hear Mercy groaning as she tried to explain world history to a lizardman from another dimension. I was almost to the door of the other room when I felt the ping of my Lifesense. There was someone on the other side of the door. Standing in the other room. Waiting to catch us alone. A trap. I knew it.

With a pulse of will, the great-sword on my back shifted and slithered into a pair of cleavers in my hands. If Leo and his minions wanted to get the drop on me, then they were going to have to do better. I kicked into the room and closed the distance before Orphia could even draw her sword. Both cleaver blades scissored into position around her scrawny neck before she could even squeak.

It would be so easy just to keep on moving. Just to let the blades snip together and feel all my worries fading away. Leo couldn't fault me for it. He'd already slapped Orphia around for chasing after me without permission. He'd probably thank me. This was probably the in that we needed. He obviously wanted Eternals in his camp, if he was suddenly missing one and needed a replacement, surely that just opened up more opportunities for us.

But she was still a person, even if she was Orphia, and I didn't need to kill her to stop her from killing me. So I didn't.

"What do you want?"

I eased the blades apart enough for her to speak without doing herself an injury. "I want you gone."

"Yeah." I rolled my eyes at her. "You made that abundantly clear."

"You are the spawn of chaos, and you have corrupted those who should have been brother and sister to me. You are..."

At some point that night I wanted to get to bed, which meant cutting her off before she could launch into her usual screed. “Can we skip the insults and rambling and get to the point. You didn’t need to sneak in here to tell me I’m the worst. I’ve heard it all before.”

Her eyes had narrowed to slits. The bones in her face seemed to jut out, stripping all over her natural Alvaren beauty away and leaving the stark truth of her madness on clear display. “You are not going to corrupt Lord Leofric. You are not going to turn him from his divine purpose. I will not let you.”

I eased the blades back from her neck, then shrugged once I was sure it wasn’t going to cause catastrophic bleeding. “I don’t want to? We all want to beat Araphel? Yeah? Nobody wants to beat him more than me.”

“You cannot win me over. You cannot trick me. I am not going to be deceived by honeyed words. I know you for what you are.” Maybe I shouldn’t have taken the swords from her neck so soon. She was looking more and more axe crazy with every passing moment. “But... Leofric has not hardened his heart enough to do what must be done. He has forbidden me from dispatching you, thinking that you might convert to the cause of righteousness.”

“Great. So you decided to sneak in here to tell me you aren’t going to sneak in here and murder me. Much appreciated. Get out.” I stepped to the side and pointed to the door.

“I do not sneak, this is my domain and I travel freely within...” She started off snarling then somehow managed to get herself under control. “No. I will not be distracted into bandying words with you again. I have come here to tell you the truth, and hope that it might make its way through that thick skull of yours. Leofric will not succumb to your wiles. He will see you for what you are. He will know you as his enemy. When that time comes, there shall be nothing that you can do to stand up against his power. He will destroy you utterly. Banish you to the darkest corners of the world...”

I yawned, “Uh huh.”

“All of this is certain to come to pass, but I wish to spare my Lord the heartbreak of your betrayal.” She closed the distance that I’d put between us, urgency vibrating through her. “Leave now. Nobody will stop you. Nobody will pursue you. Just pick a direction and walk. There is nothing keeping you here.”

“My friends are here.”

“If you cared for these ‘friends’ at all, you would not doom them by continuing your association.” She was close enough now that those big golden eyes of hers were bathing my face in radiance. With a little bit of smugness I realised that even though her face had been hand carved by the gods themselves, she wasn’t as pretty as homegrown Seren. “They are solar eternal, the avatars of all that is righteous in this broken world, and your very presence taints them.”

I stared her down. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Then I have wasted my kindness on a beast that cannot comprehend it. Hardly surprising.”

“Been great catching up with you, but now it is bed time.” Piece by piece, I took my armor apart and set the hunks of metal and adjoining eel-skin down. “Are you getting out or are you getting naked?”

The look on her face in that moment almost made having to deal with her again worthwhile.

“Disgusting.”

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it.” She backed out of the room, reaching for the door but never quite managing to tear her scowl away from me. I yelled after her as she retreated for the stairs, “Once you go Faun, there’s no moving on!”

When I glanced around, Mercy was standing there gawking at me, with Asher doing his best not to do the same behind her. “Orphia popped in. Wants me to die, or go away, or both.”

“So she hasn’t changed much?” Mercy smirked. I kept forgetting how much Mercy hated her.

“She’s got a nasty crush on lovely lord Leo, but otherwise, same crazy bitch as always.”

“It is most unfortunate that she cannot be reasoned with.” Asher sighed. “It would be helpful to us to have another ally in the quest.”

“She wants to be friends with you guys. You guys are shiny golden boys and girls like her and Leo.” I sulked back to my room. “It is just me that she hates.”

Asher didn’t seem to catch my tone, turning to Mercy with a curious tilt to his head. “Perhaps she might be more amenable to reason once Maulkin has departed on his mission, come morning.”

“Uh, pretty sure I don’t want to be friends with her.” Mercy said, glancing my way. “She sucks.”

Maybe she thought she was giving me moral support, but I was grumpy, and Asher wasn’t a good verbal punching bag. “So I’ve got to play pretend, but you don’t? How is that fair?”

“Orphia doesn’t matter.” Mercy called through, “Leo though, he’s old, right? He’s badass? And he’s got a shard already.”

I popped back out into the hallway. Just itching for a real fight. “I could take him.”

“Could you?” Asher’s stare was boring into me. But he wasn’t trying to provoke me. I knew him too well for that. He didn’t expect any sort of emotional response to anything he said, and seemed constantly amazed when the rest of us had our little outbursts. He genuinely wanted to know the answer, and I couldn’t lie to him, even in as foul a mood as I was in, because he’d base his decisions on the stupid things that we said.

I groaned for a long long time, then finally admitted, “Well... the three of us could for sure.”

He nodded at that. “Then that shall be our course of action should all other opportunities fail.”

“Ugh.” I stomped back through to the other room. “I’m going to sleep.”

Mercy stomped right after me, although she had the good grace to spin on her heel so she couldn’t see me continuing to undress. “Asher bunks with you.”

I threw a stretch of legging at her. "Asher steals the blanket!"

She yelled back over her shoulder. "There are two beds in here!"

"Maulkin has been known to produce quite tremendous sounds with his nose while he is sleeping."

Asher poked his nose around the door. "Perhaps it would be for the best if I just..."

"Nope." Mercy shoved him in. "No cold lizard feet in my bed." She slammed the door shut. "Goodnight."

