

Chapter 9

The Lady Faun was called Mhirka, and she was not a big fan of people asking her questions. She didn't bother introducing anyone else as we moved through the camp, and it took a fair bit of badgering before she'd even tell me her name.

I was gradually realizing as we moved out through the circles of stone that this was not anything like the campsite I'd imagined when I first set out. There were hundreds of Faun here. Most of them working on the haphazard farms in the inner rings, closest to the apex of the desolation, right where I'd expect everything to die the most. Apparently whatever roots and tubers they'd planted were tougher than the touch of the god of destruction. I could not imagine them tasting good, but maybe evil potatoes were better than regular ones?

There were more stretched-skin tents as we moved further from the epicenter. Way more than I'd seen on the far side. We heading away from the Bastion. Further from the prying eyes of Leofric and his minions, it made sense that they'd stack up over here.

All the chiefs started to make more sense too. This wasn't just one clan of Faun. The sparse clothes and armor that they wore was different from one to the next, but I'd see repetitions in color and theme. Patterns of scars carved into the bare grey skin, standing up like ridges. Some wore traces of fur, bleached to white, or harvested from some snowbound beast. I never seemed to spot the same Faun twice, but they were perpetually in motion. I kept moving my estimates up. There had to be more than a thousand Faun. As many of these glorious grey giants as the puny men that Leofric's wall had to show for itself.

We wove through the camp, following some path that I didn't know. Not heading dead away from Leofric's lands now, but lulling over to one side. I tried to ask why, but Mhirka just snapped, "Shallows." Which was informative as hell.

The rings crumbled more and more as we headed this way, and when I started to feel living stone that my Artifice could reach in the upturned ridges we passed, I took a second look at what had seemed like the same destruction as surrounded us at the first glance. This was not the same. The walls of stone had been brought down, not by the great explosions when the Voidgod died, but by hammer strikes and effort. No Artifice, just violence. The Faun had beaten the stone into submission. A great smooth ramp, disguised as the same chaos that surrounded it.

Why this bit and not any other bit? I couldn't say. Maybe this bit had just pissed them off.

The dead desert of ash stretched out from the foot of the ramp and I had to bite back a sigh. I'd had enough of this place to last me a lifetime already. It was only then that I glanced back up the ramp that I spotted a half dozen more Faun trailing along behind us. Bristling with spears and jostling each other for position. "Uh, how big is this thing we're hunting?"

“Khorkhoi are small, but fast. You must be ready for them. They spring from the ashes. Listen for them, your ears will serve better than your eyes.”

“Little red worm dudes. Yeah, I’ve met them before...” I glanced back over my shoulder again. “So why do we need so many people?”

She glanced sideways at me. “Protection.”

“You don’t need any...” I spoke louder so that the Faun trailing behind could definitely hear me. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

“They are for you. From me.”

I didn’t laugh. That was good. I got the impression that if I laughed she might have stabbed me in the gizzard, and I don’t even know what a gizzard is. I always picture it as some sort of lizard in my belly? Anyway, good for me, not laughing. “I don’t need protecting.”

She still wouldn’t look at me and I couldn’t work out why. It was like she was embarrassed about something. “You are a new male, a warrior, joining with our clans. There may be... competition for you among the chieftains, among the women. They want to make sure I do not stake a claim unfairly.”

None of that made sense to me for a surprisingly long time, until finally the penny dropped and I couldn’t look at her either. They were chaperones to make sure we didn’t get freaky while we were meant to be hunting worms. That was a whole other thing that would never have crossed my mind. I felt like my brain had stalled out. “Oh. Oh! Okay. Wow. I mean, you are like... eight foot of pure gorgeous and anybody would be crazy to say no...”

“I have no interest in...” She tried to interrupt me as I rambled but there was no way that I was going to stop with only one foot jammed in my mouth. Oh no. My mouth was running now, and no force in this world could make it stop. I certainly couldn’t.

“...But... uh I’m seeing someone right now, and we haven’t talked about whether or not we’re seeing each other exclusively yet and I’d really have to talk to her about that before I could even think about...”

She turned to face me head on and shouted with all sincerity, “You disgust me.”

“Oh thank the gods.” I deflated a bit.

Thankfully she wasn’t actually paying attention to me as I tried to pull myself back together. She’d dropped down into a crouch and she was patting at the ash. Desperate for the distraction, I squatted down too. “What is it? Worm-sign?”

She arched a brow. “Worm sign?”

I sighed. “Can you tell where the worm is?”

She pointed. “Beneath the ash.”

“I... I thought you could track it.”

“They leave no tracks.” She cocked her head to the side. “They are under the ash.”

“I... right.” Somehow I had travelled to another world, become buff, slayed giant monsters, landed a hot Alvaren girlfriend, and I was even worse at talking to girls than when I’d been a couch lump. Damned if I was going to stop trying though. “So how do we find some worms for dinner then?”

Her patting on the packed ash had become rhythmic now. A steady rat-a-tat-tat. The sound reverberating down into the ash. “We do not. They find us.”

She went on drumming and I went on waiting. Now that I understood how it worked, I felt like a bit of an idiot. Like we were going to go stalking over the dunes and catch a worm napping in the sunshine.

Time stretched on, and I tried to join in with the drumming, only to catch a slap on my hand between beats. “Steady. Like rainfall. You have no rhythm.”

So then I was back to hanging around, waiting for worms to show up. I started to wonder if maybe this was an elaborate prank. Hazing the new guy. It seemed in character for the Faun I’d met so far. I mean... it was funny, but I had too much other stuff to be getting on with to appreciate being sent to the store for a skyhook or plaid paint or whatever. Hunting the worm even sounded like a made up job. I stared down at Mhirka, trying to work out if there was a smirk hiding behind her fixed expression of concentration. If it was there, I couldn’t see it, but then again her face had been a source of confusion to me since the moment I’d met her. Sexy confusion. Language was translated for me but expressions on these inhuman faces were inscrutable. I think that’s what inscrutable means anyway.

The longer that I waited, the more that my brain started to pester me. What was I going to do? I didn’t even know why I was here, except to try and make Leofric happy. Something that I personally could not care less about. Actually no, I did care, anything that made Leo happy was probably a bad thing. The thought of kicking puppies was probably the only thing that got him up in the morning.

What was the best case scenario here, the Faun attacked the wall for me and all died? Or killed all the soldiers on the other side? There would be too much blood on my hands either way. All because two eternal had been having a tiff for a millennium or two.

I didn’t like being stuck in a position where I had to choose who lives and dies. That was why when I was a kid and my parents asked if I wanted to be a doctor I proceeded to be academically disappointing for the rest of my life.

It had been fine here in Amaranth up until now, because most of the time when I was deciding people should die, they either wanted to, or they had signed up for it by attacking me. I didn’t have to think about it. I didn’t have to try and balance it in my head. This was different. As far as I could see the only ones that deserved a hasty chopping up in all of this were Leo and Koschei.

A khorkhoi leapt out of the ground and latched onto my ass before I even noticed the tell-tale puff of ash. “Oh come on.”

I reached for my sword, but more of them were already bursting up out of the ground. Flesh torpedoes launched directly at the center of mass. One by one they latched on, chewing and chewing through my

poor battered armor. It didn't seem fair that I got wormed when Mhirka was the one doing all the drumming, but I guess when you see a big hunk of man meat like me, it only makes sense to assume it is the buffet.

With a flex of Artifice I split my great-sword into a pair of cleavers and set to work. Lopping off heads and hoping that would stop them chewing. It did, eventually, when the dumb-ass worm realised that it was missing everything below its neck. But by then there were more coming and I had no time to think.

Fencing with Seren had honed my reflexes, but nothing could prepare me for a wall of chompy worms all coming at me all at once. If I had a moment to think, I could have made a shield, but the time it took me would have let another dozen of the little nippers latch on. So my blades spun figures of eight, catching them as they came. Some I struck as they went for me, others splatted against the broad flats of the blades. A few made it through, but not enough, and there were moments when the leaping worms stuttered or slowed and I could lop the lucky ones free of my flesh before they got much more than a mouthful.

Mhirka stood well back of all this with a smile on her face, not even pretending that she was going to help. If a stray khorkhoi got past me she might step forward to end it's wiggles with a thrust of her spear, but she seemed content to let me bear the brunt of wormagedon.

Gradually the storm slowed until it was just a gentle patter of worm on iron. Until, finally even that stopped and there was no sound but the leaking of worm juices into the ash, and the breeze drifting the dunes.

There were still a few detached heads chomping into me as I wiped my blades clean on my thighs. Something wriggled between my teeth and I spat out a worm gibbet. No idea how that got in there. I couldn't recall biting any worms. Maybe a bit just flew in while I was screaming abuse at the worms. Who knows? "Thanks for all the help."

Mhirka was pacing back and forth, skewering worm bodies on her spear for ease of transportation, making one giant worm kebab. Gross. "This is the way of the Chagnar Faun. Our enemies send monsters to feast on our flesh, and we make them our dinner." She hammered her spear down again, and again. "This is the way of the Chagnar Faun, snatching life from the jaws of death. You are not Faun. You are soft. Weak. You seek the easiest path in all things."

I watched her angrily stabbing the stuff I'd already killed, brushed some more heads off my shoulders and then actually thought about what she was saying instead of getting angry about it. There was no point getting mad. She was right. I wasn't a Faun. I liked them, they seemed like fun people to hang out with, but I was an Eternal, and pretending otherwise would have made us both less than we were.

Blinking my eyes so I could escape the limits of my chunky man-flesh and use Artifice, I transformed my cleavers into an iron pike, swayed for a moment, then started skewering the worms by my feet. Haphazardly at first, then building up speed. Once I was sure that the anger from her commentary was all gone, I asked. "Who told you that everything has to be hard?"

She brandished her stick of slimy meat. "This is our way. To face the harshest challenges and emerge stronger for it."

Still, something niggled at the back of my mind. Koschei had brought them here, but somehow they were happy with it. It made no sense. Even the dvergar had bitched and moaned about their tropical paradise because it was different. People didn't just accept stuff like perpetual misery and deserts of flesh eating worms. "But why though?"

"Why must the bird fly?" She drew back the first of her spears and reached for another, now surrounded by meat and dripping with slime. "This is our nature."

I snapped my fingers. "Kiwis."

Oh, there was no confusion about her facial expression now. That was definitely contempt. 100% pure sneer. "What nonsense do you speak now?"

"Kiwis are a bird. They grew up on an island with no predators, so they don't fly." I wiggled on the spot, kiwi impersonation spot on, shame she'd never seen one. "They just waddle around, looking chill and chubby."

Contempt had twisted into confusion. "You have some point in this?"

I kept on skewering bugs for dinner, getting more and more vigorous as my temper frayed. "Birds fly because they're forced to. Fish swim because it's the only way to get around in water. You keep surrounding people with deserts and death, they're going to think that is all that there is."

She spat into the ash. "We have no need for the soft comforts of other lands. We are strong."

"Because all the ones who aren't die." I didn't know that for certain until I said it out loud, but it was the only thing that made sense really. The logical extreme of their obsession with individuality and personal power above all else.

She beat a fist against her chest, smearing gore and worm-sludge. "They are not Chagnar. They are not strong."

"So even if they could cure diseases, plan better hunts... even though they could make you a spear that flies straighter than any you can make yourself, if they can't use it then they deserve to die?" She had to understand how wrong this all was when I spelled it out to her. She had to.

She didn't. "That is our way."

I was scrabbling for figurative straws as I chased a tricky bit of worm around in circles with my spear-tip. "And all the old grey women I saw back at camp, they deserve to die too?"

She drew herself up to her full height and stared back across the ash towards the stony spines of home. "If they have not got the strength to stand, they should fall."

"Yeah, that's insane." Oops didn't mean to say that bit out loud. Oh well, I was committed now. "And I'd bet anything you like that all this survival of the fittest crap comes from Koschei."

The tip of her worm-loaded spear swung to point me, fury was etched into her face. Her shoulders aligned with the spear. Every part of her was tensed for the lunge. "It is our creed. Despite all that the Faun have endured, still we survive."

She looked genuinely surprised when I didn't fade back from the threat. Hell, I was surprised at the fire in my voice when I shouted back. "You deserve to do more than survive. You deserve to thrive. If you had just a little patch of real land, your farmers could feed everyone without having to scrape in the dirt. You could hunt real animals instead of worm-meat."

She didn't attack, but she didn't falter either. "We have been driven here by our enemies. Driven to the edge of..."

I cut that nonsense off dead in its tracks. "What enemies?"

She swung her spear out, flicking bug juice in an arc, pointing out at everywhere but here. "All the people of this world loathe us, they would see us..."

"There are no people." She pulled up short. Stunned that I'd interrupted her again. "Almost everywhere I've been in this world is empty. There are monsters all over the place, sure, but big tough Chagnar Faun like you could clear them out in like a day, tops. The only one who has driven you anywhere is... you. All of you, following Koschei. Obeying him like good little slaves."

She flung down the spear and charged me then. I dropped my own and caught her hands before they could lock on my neck. She roared in my face, "Chagnar bow to no one!"

She pushed against me and I could see the moment of surprise when there was no give. I had been buffing up my potency since the minute I landed on this rock. Fingers interlinked, she was the one to give ground as I surged back in against her. Her feet skidded in the wet ash. "Then why are you doing what he tells you?"

With a twist of her wrists and her hips, all my bulk was turned against me. I lost my footing, almost tumbling to the dirt. If it hadn't have been for my grip on her hands I probably would have gone down. Even so I was down on one knee as she growled down to me. "The strongest lead. This is our way."

I didn't know I was grinning until I saw my face reflected in her eyes. No wonder she was pissed off. "So if I kicked his ass, you'd all do what I say?"

She pushed down on me until my wrists were twisting back, and I let her drive me down until I was almost sitting. She snarled. "Koschei is beyond you."

Then I flopped back, letting her weight and mine carry us both over in a clumsy roll. One moment she was standing over me, the next she was laid out on the ash with her narrow waist trapped between my knees and her arms pinned down.

"Keep underestimating me." I leaned in close enough that I could feel her frantic breath heaving on my face. So close that I could see her figure of eight pupils widening in excitement. "I dare you."

She did not try to buck me off, laying perfectly still beneath me as I clambered back to my feet and collected our spears of bugs. Hefting them up onto one shoulder and setting off back towards camp.

Sometime between me getting up and me holding out her spears to her she had found her footing once more, but I was very deliberately not paying attention. My blood was thumping in my ears, and I dreaded to think what might happen if she came at me again. I had kept my temper under a short leash since I'd almost killed Seren. I didn't like what this rage in my gut could make my body do without even consulting my brain. The funny thing was, I was never an angry guy before I died. Maybe it was some flaw or feature of this new body. Maybe it was something to do with being a lunar eternal, beast of chaos and all that jazz. Maybe now that I had enough power I could feel the desire to change things for the better burning in me.

She took her spears without a word, and if our little entourage of observers had anything to say about us wrestling in the dust, they kept it to themselves. Given what I'd seen of the Faun so far, maybe wrestling was another normal bit of conversation for them. Regardless, they beat a retreat ahead of us, and we came back to the settlement, if you could even call it that, before the sun had dipped down beneath the highest upshots of stone.

Mission accomplished on all counts. There was plenty of bug for folks to eat, and I had learned what I needed to know to understand the Faun. Even if it was stuff I'd have preferred to go my whole life never knowing.

Mhirka parted ways with me as soon as she could, still keeping herself to herself. We dumped our worm-load into a basket of her clan, then that was the end of it. The prickling anger that had kept me painfully aware of her presence all the way back across the dunes abated as she shuffled off into the crowd. I wanted to follow her, but I also wanted to stay as far away from her as possible. I had no idea what might happen the next time we met, and the longer I didn't have to work it out, the happier I'd be.

So I wandered on my own for a little while as the sun crept lower and lower and the winds whipping across from the barren expanse beyond the stones turned chill. I saw everything in the place through new eyes now. The reluctance to share any task, making each farmer seek out their own little patch of dirt, every bent-backed old Faun shrinking with age to set up their own stew pot. Even the scouts I passed on my way back in were all alone, all peering out in the same direction when one of them could have done the job of three if they'd just talk. The endless clashing colors of all the clans came to make more sense too. Each one was more of an extended family than any sort of communal culture. Only one thing was holding them all together here in this hell, and that was Koschei.

It all came back to him. Every thought that I had, every plan that I tried to concoct. It was him or Leo in the center of it. Now I'm not claiming that I'm a genius, or above average intelligence... or of average intelligence, but when all of your plans hinge on the whims of one person, you start thinking about going to see that one person. I headed towards Koschei's cave in the middle of the settlement, shouldering past the chieftains that moved to block my way without even noticing them loom over me. It was posturing, and I didn't have the time or the patience for it. Surging strength, I could have thrown them off the crest. As it was I just pushed through them as unobtrusively as I could muster.

There were some comments about my diminutive size, which were honestly pretty brave coming from people with crotches at punching height, but I paid them no attention. Why would I bother arguing with the monkey when the organ grinder was right down that tunnel?

Once more my journey into the depths of the earth seemed to take so much longer than it had when Koschei was bouncing along ahead of me, and this time I worked out why. Even though I didn't rely on them the way that I did my eyes and ears, my other senses were deadened down here. I couldn't feel the materials I was walking over with Artifice. I couldn't sense the pulse of life outside beyond the stone. Even the gentle cushioning layer of the memories embedded in the stone was missing when my Aether flared up. It was like I was drifting through empty space even though I could feel the gravel crunching underfoot, and it left me disorientated.

When I came out into the room where it happened, it took my by surprise. It shouldn't have. It was the same distance I'd walked to reach it the first time around, but somehow, it was a shock when I stepped out into the open space.

For his part, Koschei seemed unsurprised. He was still sitting cross-legged and glowing like a beacon of Aether. I didn't know if he was communing with the ancestors or just having a good dig around this area trying to sense the history despite the null zone, all I knew was that his mind was elsewhere.

I poked him with my toe.

He went on glowing and smiling beatifically like a tiny buddha. Not super useful when I needed to talk to him. And I did need to talk to him. I needed to see if what I'd said earlier had changed his mind in any way. If his mind even could be changed after so many centuries in the same rut.

I poked him again.

His eyes snapped open and moonlight flooded the chamber. I didn't crap myself, but it was a near thing. "You have returned to me."

"Yup. I'm back." I tried not to groan as I said it.

"And you have lived among my people for a day, walked their path, learned their ways, come to understand why they live as they choose to live."

Tactful. I had to be tactful. What would Mercy say? Actually no that was a bad standard for tactful. What would Asher say? Nope... actually he is no good at talking to people either. Oh gods, if I was the one who was good at talking we were all screwed. I couldn't even get pizza places to throw in free garlic bread when it said on the menu that they gave you free garlic bread. I grumbled out, "Far as I can tell, they live the way you tell them to."

If I'd hoped he might have let that little prod go by without comment, then I was dreaming. "Oh, they may heed my counsel, but there is no denying that the vital strength of the Chagnar is unmatched among mortal races. They compete and they strive for greatness. They live and breathe it."

Once again the blood started to beat in my ears. When I thought about what he had done to these people. Not only dragging them out here as the culmination of his centuries of manipulation, but imbedding his twisted ideas about right and wrong in them to the point that they thought what he told them was their own culture. It came out in a growl. "We can do the philosophy argument later. I want to know what you've decided."

He raised a hairless brow. "Do you mean, will I cast aside my duties to the Faun just because you have been convinced by some charlatan that you have some great destiny and history is being unwritten?"

I had to un-grit my teeth to try and push through. "I mean, are you going to talk about peace, at least long enough for us to stop the apocalypse?"

He looked entirely too smug when he answered me. "No."

"No." I echoed it back to him.

"I do not know how Leofric has turned your mind, or what new powers he has unlocked since last we crossed paths. I do not know how he has created this illusion of a White Prophet in your memories, or contorted reality to make you believe that the Alvaren walk the world once more. I do not know how he had poisoned your spirit so that all of these obvious contrivances might be believed true, but I do know that I cannot walk into a trap and leave the Chagnar without their most stalwart defender." So apparently he'd had a good rummage around in my brain with his Aether powers. My brain meat had been violated. I couldn't really bring myself to be upset, let alone surprised.

He turned his glowing gaze off towards the Bastion, as though he could see clear through the solid stone and all of the intervening distance to where Asher, Mercy, Orphia and Leofric were probably having another really awkward dinner party right now. Assuming that Mercy hadn't already started kicking teeth out of people's heads. I wished that I was there with them, instead of down here in this dark hole.

They were on Koschei's mind too. "How could I abandon my people when the enemy is massing beyond the wall. Four eternal bound to the path of the tyrant. One of them of an age and power with me. Three more, newborn but full of boundless potential. It is far too great a threat to allow to fester. We must lance this boil before it can corrupt the whole world."

"Thanks for clearing that up. You're going to ignore everything I said to you, and everything that you plucked out of my memory without asking, except the bits that fit in with what you've already decided, and then you're going to pretend that I'm crazy instead of accepting that things are changing. Cool. That makes things easier."

I pointed my spear at him.

