

Chapter 8

“Do you know where you’ve come wandering to?” Koschei spun on his heel to face me once we were past all the looming Faun warlords and inside the cave he’d claimed as his own. Since he came up to about crotch height, I had to make an extremely abrupt stop or become a lot more intimately acquainted with him than I’d planned to.

I teetered on my tiptoes for a moment before rocking back on my heels. “Very rarely.”

He reached out and patted the wall. The stone was still dead to my other senses, but by the light of my eyes I could pick out the wild whorls and spikes patterning all over it. The same force that had created the ridges outside had scarred this cavern. Koschei wandered deeper as he spoke, running his fingers across the bumps and humps with a more than passing familiarity. “This is the place where it happened. The one who did it turned to ash, the land he walked turned to ash. Everything, wiped away with the death blow. Take a walk any way but to the Bastion and you see the wastes. Nothing but the wastes. On and on, far as the sea. Not the half a world they said would die with him, but enough. Too much.”

It stopped me in my tracks when I realised what he was telling me. “This is where Araphel...”

“Where he fell.” Koschei nodded his little bald head deeper into the darkness. “Where the hero of Amaranth fell. Where the world stopped dying.” He let out a little sigh. “Or started dying slower.”

Now instead of stomping along as usual, I tried to keep my clumsy footsteps from echoing. Like I might disturb all the history that was piled up here if I made too much racket. I followed the little Eternal further and further from the dwindling daylight until only we would have been able to see and only our special glowing vision let us pick our way forward.

Beneath the earth, the tunnel bloomed out into a cavern. Nothing grandiose, but big enough that I had to strain to see the opposite side in the darkness. At the very center of that empty sphere, there was a black mark on the stone, broken up only by the paler silhouettes of a sword, broken into fragments. I couldn’t help myself. I stepped down to them and bent to look. My two shards were there among the rest of the pale marks. Perfectly outlined. He was either telling the truth, or he had put way too much planning into this lie.

I wet my lips, and felt like I was verging on doing something blasphemous when I finally spoke up. “Why are you here?”

“Am I here to steal past glory, like gold clod on his wall? Am I basking in memories of better times?” Koschei cackled. His voice had none of the gruffness I’d come to associate with the Dvergar and their rumbling language. It was musical. Almost comedically high pitched. Like he was a little Eastern European leprechaun. “You know why I’m here. You can feel it, same as I feel it.”

He had his hand on the wall again. Like he was savoring the texture. I tugged off one of my gloves, and pressed my bare hand to the floor. Aether told me nothing. There was no rush of ghosts. It was null. Just like my Sphere of Influence. “The dead zone?”

“Not all our gifts are useless here, but enough of them. The rest are numbed.” He plopped down to sit cross-legged beside me. “The void god’s greatest gift, robbing us of ours.”

If this whole place was invisible to the gods and anyone wandering around with god powers, that meant we were hidden too. “So it is camouflage? You’re hiding here from other Eternals?”

“You met Leofric? He set you after me? Vengeance burns brighter as the ages turn. When there is no end to the cycle. It is not quenched with any amount of blood. He kills me. I kill him. He raises his armies, I put them down. It does not stop. So long as I live, he will hate me. So long as he lives, I will stop him.”

Up until this point, I’d assumed that everything Leofric had told me was a lie, but now I realized with a start that one part was true at least. “Oh, so you really are rallying all the Faun against him?”

“If I could, I’d rally all the world against him. But this world, his kind, his masters and his servants, they’ve had the run of it too long. Amaranth is poisoned against us.”

I knew this place was a mess, but I didn’t know the Solar Court had done any of it. “What?”

“They call us beasts of chaos. That we run wild and do as we please no matter the walls they build to keep us in. What is the word for that? Not chaos. Freedom.” He reached out and turned my head by the horns until I was looking at him. So I could see nothing but the glow of his eyes in the dark. “Araphel left Amaranth so scared that they handed it all away to Leofric and his ilk, to kings and laws and their precious order, because then when the bad came, it was not their own fault. They found their freedom in subservience. Weak. Cowardly.”

He gripped tighter to my horns when I tried to pull back, one of his tiny hands on each side of my head, pinning me in place with a strength that his tiny body should have been incapable of. I could feel his Aether flare and mine shining to life inside me in response. In the blinding light of his eyes I could see everything he was describing. Playing out like shadow puppets in front of the moon.

“In the time before there was balance. Sun and moon could fight, but neither one of us could win, because we’re even matched in power. Then the Voidgod came. Hasn’t been a Lunar Eternal since me. Not until you.” The ancient battlefields shimmered and danced before me. Glorious battles between titans and gods in mortal skins. What we Eternals were meant to be. Living in this world. Waging battles for supremacy, but protecting the people here too. Felling the wyrms when they came burning. Breaking the chains of magic that bound the Faun.

“The sun-gods kept pouring their servants in. Pouring more of their will in. Locking more and more of the world in cages. Everything numbered and quantified and trapped. Trapped in this terrible stasis for all eternity. The world cannot heal, it cannot grow, it cannot change. And it is not because of some long dead Voidgod. It is because of them.”

I could see it now. The words of my being, inscribed by some bureaucrat’s pen in the dark court of the Heavens. The rules of the world being set in stone, and all the possibilities that had been dwindling. The grand pillar of divinity at the heart of each god fragmented and filed away in separate columns. The great

tangled web of carefully constructed order that had completely swallowed up the whole of Amaranth, pinning everyone and everything in place.

His expression was startled when I surged my Potency to tear free of his grasp and the overpowering weight of his stare. My breath came ragged and my body shook. I wanted to kill him then and there for pushing his thoughts into my head. For trying to force me to be like him. Instead I told him the most devastating thing I could manage. "Leofric would have done that, if he could have."

Already tiny, he seemed to shrink even further when I said that. He couldn't meet my furious gaze. "You needed to understand."

"I understood fine without you trying to force yourself in my skull." I staggered to my feet, stumbling under the weight of the assault. The swirl of ghosts and memories were still drifting around this dark cavern like long dead dust. "I understood Leofric fine when he made his pitch and tried to win me over to his cause, too."

He scrambled to his feet, those tiny hands clenching into tiny fists. I'd felt the strength in him. He probably could punch a Faun to death without much sweat. "Then you have chosen to serve him?"

"No. Of course I didn't." I put my hands over my eyes, trying to rub away the afterimages of his blazing eyes. "You're both idiots."

His flighty little pixie voice went flat. "What?"

"You are both idiots." It came out in a roar, echoing back on me just as loud. I didn't care. After what he just pulled, I was allowed to shout. "You're so caught up in fighting each other that you've forgotten about what really matters."

He was shouting back, as if volume was what his argument needed after he'd already broadcast it at full volume right into my skull. "He wants to put the world in chains!"

I turned away from him. Looking at him made my blood boil. If I started swinging then every Faun up outside the cave was going to come running and I was going to have to kill them all. I didn't want to kill them all. Like it or not, they were my people. "And you want everyone to be free to do anything they want whenever they want to, I got it. That's fine. You two can go on duking it out for all eternity. I've got more important things to deal with."

"What could be more important than freedom? It is our very purpose for being?" He caught me by the wrist and spun me around, trying to meet my gaze. That hazy glow of Aether still dancing all around him. His spirit, just waiting to force itself in me again. To make me feel how he felt. To make me nothing more than an extension of his will. "What could be more important than freeing the world from bondage? More important than casting down a tyrant?"

"Araphel is coming back."

That took the wind out of his sails real quick. "What?"

“You’re camped out here of all places, and you don’t even know?” I groaned and slumped back down to the ground. “He’s coming back.”

There was a desperate edge in Koschei’s voice now. He fell to his knees as I sat. All his attempts at brain-blasting me into submission forgotten in an instant as blind panic took over. “He cannot come back. He was defeated. He died.”

“How many times have you died and come back? What about Leo? We aren’t even full gods and we manage it. You think Araphel can’t?”

All the quiet presence that Koschei had cultivated crumbled as he scabbled for straws. “But it makes no sense. Why would he be coming back now of all times? Now after so long?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t know much at all. The prophecies said it is soon. And there have been enough weird coincidences for me to start believing in those prophecies.”

“I do not believe it.” He drew himself back up to his feet, level with my face again. His voice cracked. “Not yet.”

What could I say to that? I didn’t believe it either, not after the White Prophet told us it was so. Not even after I’d laid hands on the first of the shards after picking a random direction to walk in. Even now I struggled to believe that the fate of this whole world was somehow my responsibility. But here I was, taking responsibility for it anyway.

Maybe this second life was meant to counter-balance last time around when I couldn’t even be trusted with the survival of a potted plant. Maybe I had delusions of grandeur just because I’d literally been chosen by the gods to save the world. Maybe it was because I’d spent my whole first lifetime as a background character in other people’s stories and this time around I had the opportunity to actually make a difference in the world. So I sat there in silence while he tried to wrap his head around it. Pretending that I knew for certain that what I was telling him was true, when only Asher completely believed it.

Koschei’s voice had lost all its charm now. It was a somber drone when he said, “Even if it is true then... what can we do in the face of such malice? What can be done to stop him?”

I pointed past him to the stained rock in the middle of the chamber. “The same thing that stopped him last time.”

“The Rusted Blade?” His laugh came like a sob. “It is gone. Sundered into...”

He froze when he looked up and saw the pieces of metal in my hands. He didn’t doubt what his senses were telling him. He didn’t think that it was some sort of trick. Some things were too fundamentally real for even the most deluded demagogue to turn away from. The shards, this place, they felt realer than the rest of Amaranth, so steeped in history that the memories we couldn’t touch with our Aether weighed down on it.

“You have two shards. How did you... How could you...” Even now he was struggling against the overwhelming reality that we all faced now. He reached for what he knew. The structure of this world that he claimed to want overthrown. “You are scarcely more than a newborn. How could you have two shards?”

“Those coincidences I was talking about? These landed in my lap. More or less.” I brought the two pieces together in front of his eyes. It was as if I wasn’t there anymore. Just him and the metal. There was a real danger in letting him know I had these shards. Every wannabe dictator on Amaranth probably wanted what Leofric had, and I’d just flashed two of them to somebody who was already at the brainwashing strangers phase of his own descent into madness. But at the end of the day, despite what he’d done, my gut still told me that Koschei was one of the good guys. He seemed to genuinely care about the Faun at least. Even if he cared about beating Leofric more. Besides, he had something I needed more than safety. “I know where all the rest are, except for one. The one that the Faun were given.”

His brows drew down, and he blinked hard enough that the sexy lumps of old metal in my hands lost their hold on him. I was guessing I’d just trampled right on top of another touchy subject.

When the Faun were feeling passionate, there was a growl in their voice that you could feel vibrating your skeleton. When Koschei was angry, it was more like a pissed off Chihuahua. “We were given nothing. We fought Araphel the same as everyone else, once his true nature was revealed. We bested him and we were entitled to our share of the bounty.”

I hopped on the hype train, hoping that it might stop at useful information junction. I asked excitedly, “So where is it?”

“Hidden. Gone beyond the reach of all who would use the shard against us.” He was so proud of himself. Grinning away while my hands closed into fists around the shards. “Gone somewhere Leofric can never go to seek it.”

I picked my words as carefully as I could. “Which is where exactly?”

“The Faun worship their dead. The memory of them, the spirits that I call up, that is the greatest service I do for my horned kin. It is why the chieftains heed me. I speak for their dead.”

I’ll admit that I was starting to lose patience a little bit when I interrupted him. “Yeah, I’ve got Aether powers too. What’s your point?”

“With the Pillar of Aether it was possible for me to bind a physical object to the spirit of...”

I clapped my hands, shaking him out of his reverie. “Soulbinding, yup. Done it twice. Skip to the good bit.”

He paused for just a moment to scowl at me before he launched into story time all over again. Something else he had in common with Leo, they both loved the sound of their own voices. “Long ago, there was a great hero among the Faun.” Koschei stared off into the darkness, those same images that he’d been beaming into my head playing before his eyes. His memories of time so long past that I couldn’t even wrap my head around it. “Gorgafel. A warrior beyond all others. A match for the

Voidspawn, for Eternals, the greatest of their kind. To him was passed the shard, and to him I bound it, so that even in death he would be its guardian.”

From the sounds of it, I was finally going to get the big undead fight I’d spent so much time psyching myself up for when I first discovered Aether. I was already giddy with anticipation. There was going to be a dungeon, with skeletons wandering around, maybe the entrance would be in the shape of a skull and you had to walk in through the mouth. I was so ready. “So where’s the grave I’ve got to desecrate?”

Koschei looked at my obvious glee with reproach, and no small amount of pity. “I did not bind it to his flesh. I bound it to his spirit. He has passed from this world into the realm of the dead, and taken the shard with him where none can follow.”

What did that even mean? “So…”

“It is beyond your reach, Eternal. Beyond both of us, and Leofric’s quest to assemble the blade and rally all to his side too. Amaranth is our prison. Even in death we cannot escape it.”

I pressed the heels of my hands into my eyes so that they didn’t explode out of my head from all the pressure in my skull. There was a scream of rage trapped inside me and I had to block every exit or there was no way of knowing where it would come blasting out. When I trusted myself to speak, all that I managed was a rumbling groan. “That is the opposite of helpful. You get that, right?”

“We could not have known that Araphel might someday return.” Koschei was already mounting a defense. “I was doing what I must to protect the Faun. You have seen how the Solar Court’s chosen people have treated them. You bear their flesh, you know their burden. I had to do what I could to keep them from harm.”

Trusting my eyeballs to stay put, I lowered my hands and gave him a baleful stare. “And instead you doomed the world. Good job.”

He was fidgeting. Angry at me for questioning his decisions, or angry with himself for making them. “The Faun…”

I wasn’t letting him use them as an excuse. Not when it was so blindingly obvious that all he cared about was keeping the Faun shard out of Leofric’s hands at any cost. Did he actually care for them at all, or were they just the ideal excuse? “The Faun could be living in some beautiful green forest with plenty of food and freedom to roam, but you dragged them here to the dead end of nowhere so that you could hide from Leofric. So you could plan your little wars against him, and prove once and for all that your team is the biggest and toughest. Exceptional work, buddy. Really looking out for them.”

“If they do not fight back, then the whole world will be taken from them. Would you have them roll over and die?” Was he talking about the Faun or himself? If all he knew was endless war, of course the promise of peace felt like imminent death.

“Have you taken a look outside lately? Do you know how little of Amaranth is still populated by anything other than monsters? We built a whole new island kingdom last month. Roamed across empty plains full of game and giant mushroom monsters and…” I could barely look at him. I had to swallow down my

disgust. “Whatever parts of Amaranth aren’t overrun by monsters are empty. You’ve had your eyes locked on Leofric for so long that you didn’t even notice that?”

He piped up immediately with another excuse. “The desolation...”

“Is here. Not everywhere.”

He seemed more and more frail with every passing moment. How could he have lived all these thousands of years with nobody calling him on his shit. Was he like Leofric, so sure that he was right that he couldn’t even hear reason. “The Bastion...”

“Stands between you and the stuff that Leofric built. Not the whole world. You could have walked around it. You could have built boats and sailed off along the coast, or out to sea, or anywhere else. You could have strolled back out of the Ashen Wastes in whatever direction you first strolled into them and you would have found somewhere empty for your people to live. But you only cared about beating Leofric.”

Up until that moment, I could tell he had still been trying to play the wise old mentor, but now I’d pushed too far and his rage reared up. Anger at being questioned. Anger at dooming the Faun to this misery. Anger that should have been turned directly back on himself. This was all his doing. Spittle flecked his lips as he snarled out, “Do you have a clever answer for everything, stripling? Do you know more than all who came before you? Or am I just such a simpering old buffoon that you find it easy to make light of me. The soul of the Faun is that of a warrior. You ask that I take them from the war that they were promised? It would destroy them as surely as any battle. Worse, it would break them.”

“Those old ladies outside, drying out bits of worm and scraping in the dirt to feed to everyone, they’ve got your warrior spirit?” I didn’t mean to laugh in his face, but it just kind of came out. “They’d be sad if they didn’t have to camp out in a desert?”

He drew himself up to his full height and unleashed another wave of Aether spirits. Prying at the edges of my senses, trying to force their way into my mind. To make me see things his way. I caught a glimpse of his legendary Faun hero for just a moment, a shadow of him standing proud and massive between me and the moonlight. Koschei’s voice echoed down to me as I was at the bottom of a well. “The spirit of the Faun...”

It wasn’t going to work this time. I knew the trick now. With a heave of my own Aether, the moonlight peeled away from me, leaving me back in the dark of the cave. I crossed the distance to Koschei in a scramble, wrath pulsing just under my skin as I snarled, “The Faun would survive without you interfering. They might even find that they like not being at war with everyone all the time. I know even I could do with a break from it once in a while, and I think fighting is fun.”

Koschei might not have fallen off his high horse, but he stumbled back away from me quick enough. “You...” I braced myself for the abuse to come, but instead he let out the saddest little laugh I’d ever heard. “You’ve given me much to think on.”

Well fair was fair, if he could put up with me being the voice of reason, I could do the same for him.

“Listen, I know that you’re right about Leofric. I know he wants to be king of the world, and I know that he’s going to be a nightmare to get rid of once he gets any sort of foot on that ladder. I’m not saying you’re crazy. I get it. He’s bad news. I’m just saying that we need to get our priorities in order. We need to save the world before we fight over who gets to run it.”

He looked at me for the first time with anything resembling respect. “And Leofric is willing to set our conflict aside for this noble goal?”

The sound that came out of my face is best described as a blart. A blart of laughter that I couldn’t stop before it escaped. “You think I’d trust Leo enough to tell him any of this stuff? He’s a psycho.”

“So you expect me to make concessions to him without any in return?” He settled back on his haunches, frowning. “Without even giving him any indication of why I have joined my strength to his?”

“Buddy, I don’t expect anything.” I threw up my hands. “All I know is that I need his shard for this whole thing to work, same as I need the Faun one.”

“I have already told you that our shard is beyond your reach.” Koschei at least had the good grace to look ashamed about it. “Your plan has fallen at the first hurdle.”

To my surprise, the initial rage screaming had faded away to something else bubbling away in the back of my head. I was going to have to sit down and have a good stare at the character sheet in my head to be certain, but there was something about the way the Psychopomp power was phrased that made me think it might be good for more than just perma-killing stuff that was meant to resurrect. “I’ve still got some ideas about that.”

“Ideas?”

“Chernghast has given me some gnarly powers that I might be able to use to get around that whole death thing. I’m actually wondering if maybe this is why he has given me them.”

That seemed to finally have him gob smacked. Even more than the whole end of the world deal. He rocked back off his haunches to land with a thump on his bony backside. “Your patron.”

He didn’t need to hear about the whole deal with my mixed up god-court allegiance stuff right now so I just nodded knowingly. “So yeah, let’s just focus on getting Leo’s shard for now.”

“You have given me much to think on. But I am an old man, set in my ways.” He crossed his legs, as if it had been his plan all along to sit around on the floor of this cave for the rest of the day. For all I knew, this was how he spent all of his time. I’d spent the last month doing obstacle courses and getting slapped around by a sexy elf, so I really wasn’t in the right place to judge anyone’s lifestyle choices. “Give me some time to think. Let me come to some ideas of my own.”

I really wanted to just leave him there to think it through. To come up with some cunning plan that would wrest the Lucis from Leofric’s grasp without me having to fight the dude, and Orphia, and his army. Time wasn’t on my side though. “I can’t hang around too long. There are other Eternals back over

in Leo's camp. My friends. People who care more about this mission than anything else. I can't leave them there forever. It's only a matter of time before Leo says something extra-stupid and Mercy shoots him. Or she shoots Orphia on principle. Or..."

"He has two other eternals at his beck and call?" Every time that I thought Koschei was done being surprised by things. He had some new disgruntled expression ready to show me.

"Well, he's got one. And I've got two. And you've got uh... you." I counted them on my fingers. "Hold up. Am I winning?"

"I am surprised that Leofric is willing to entertain any Lunar Eternal in his court." Koschei was watching me carefully now. Like he thought I was up to something. Great. "He was always of the opinion that we were monsters in mortal flesh."

"Oh yeah, he still feels that way. So does Orphia. She's his loyal little minion now. But Mercy and Asher, they're uh," My brain stalled out for a minute as I tried to come up with a way to describe our relationship in a way that this old grumpy Eternal would understand. "They're on my side. Definitely. No question. Even if they are Solar Eternals."

A sweat had broken out on his forehead. He did not look pleased with this news. He did not look even slightly pleased with this news. "Three fresh-born Solars for the one of you..."

I stopped his descent into panic with a wave of my hands in front of his face. "Yes, but only one of them is a bag of dicks like Leo. We've got them outnumbered."

"The true nature will out." He sank back down into himself, brows drawing down, eye-lights dimming with his mood. "The tyrant in their blood will always come to the fore."

"Oh come on. They think we're all wild animals. You think they're all slave-masters in training. Isn't it possible that we're all just people?"

His squeaky comedy voice came out in a low growl. "You have not seen what I have seen."

"And you haven't seen what I've seen. They're my friends."

"Millenia of experience outweigh your... opinions." He spat the word like it was dirty. "They will betray you. Bind you. Make you subservient to them. You are not the first to try courting favor with the enemy. Through the Revelation, many of us fought side by side, but in the end it always turns out the same."

This was getting out of conversation territory and heading into that big dark patch on the map labelled *here be ranting*. "It doesn't need to be perfect and it doesn't have to last forever, we just need to hold together long enough to beat Araphel."

For what felt like forever he just sat there in silence. Brows drawn down. Thoughts so far away he couldn't even see me on the horizon anymore. I was starting to suspect that he'd genuinely forgotten I was in the room when he grumbled. "Give me time to ponder all this. Go speak with my people. Our people. Learn who they are before you tell me how they should live and die. You owe them that much."

He seemed to think that the conversation was over. I didn't really feel like arguing about whether or not we could go on arguing, and the prospect of getting to know some Faun was tempting, so I started walking back to the surface. Pausing at the entrance to the cavern for just a moment. "So, uh, they were concerned about me being a monster or something? Should I just tell them you said I'm not and hope they trust me?"

He blinked, then said with absolute conviction. "If you'd lied to me, you'd never have left this cave."

It would have been laughable if I hadn't already been manhandled and brain blasted by him in the course of a normal chat. Whatever aura of power was hanging around Leofric was here too. All the centuries spent gathering glory and climbing towards godhood had made him more than the spindly frame that he inhabited. While Leo did his best to cultivate an imposing image, Koschei seemed to do all he could to keep his strength a secret only for it to come spilling out. There was no denying what he was.

The walk down into the heart of the Wastes had been quick but climbing back up to daylight seemed to take ages. That conversation could have gone better. I kept feeling like I should have lied to Koschei, or at least told him the truth about different things. Maybe his intrusive Aether brain probing stuff would have told him that I wasn't being honest with him, but I couldn't help but feel like I'd screwed up somehow.

I emerged from the cave with my head still repeating the conversation back and forth to myself only to come face to face with the tip of the Lady Faun's spear. Caught unawares, instinct kicked in and I slapped it away. Hard enough that the shaft of the thing broke in two. Oops.

Beyond her, the chieftains were still gathered, eating and chatting among themselves. At the sight of me, the air filled with roars of laughter. "The runt returns!"

Lady Faun did not look happy with me as she scrambled to get the top half of her spear out of the ash-bank by the cave entrance where it had been embedded. Sheepish, I tramped over to join her. "Sorry."

She snarled at me. "This spear survived a hundred hunts."

There wasn't much I could do here in the middle of this tainted place, but the spear wasn't made from the same null material as the ash and the stone. Artifice washed out through the void I could feel all around me and practically leapt to the broken pieces. Putting it back together was as easy as breathing.

It didn't occur to me until the laughter abruptly stopped and everyone was staring at me that it might have been the wrong move.

Lady Faun had dropped the spear like it was something poisonous and half the chieftains had leapt to their feet, reaching for weapons.

She hissed, "How did you..."

"I told you I was an Eternal. Doesn't anybody listen?" I reached out with Artifice again, not changing the spear, but hefting it back up into her hands.

She caught it, but she was backing away from me with fear in her eyes. "Koschei cannot..."

I cut that off with a shake of my head. "We're different."

"I see that." Her expression went from scared to something else as her gaze travelled up and down me. Interested in me in some way that was just this side of predatory.

"He told me to spend time with you all. Get to know you." I was feeling a bit like a side of meat, the way she was staring and licking her pointed teeth. "So, do you want to show me the ropes?"

The chieftains had settled back into their chatter, but they were eyeing me in a way that was a lot less friendly than Lady Faun. She laughed, "Ropes?"

Right. Yes. Different planet, different lingo. I tried again, "What is a day in the life of a Faun like?"

Her grin grew even wider. "We hunt."

