

## Chapter 1

Since I popped up out of the soil of Amaranth like the biggest, ugliest mushroom you've ever seen, I've had exactly one girlfriend.

The paladin's blades shimmered in the twilight, moving so fast that it seemed the last scraps of sunlight could only barely catch them before they were gone.

There was no way that I could be that fast, that precise. Good thing I didn't need to be.

All it took was a blink and a grunt of effort and the great-sword that had knocked my other assailants on their asses shrunk and shifted, flowing like mercury around my body to form up again in a shield almost tall enough to reach my horns.

That beautiful dance smashed into the solid iron bulwark like a wave hitting the shore and a grin split my face. "Didn't expect that, did you?"

Between the helm over her face and the bulk of the shield, I couldn't see my attacker's expression, but I was hoping it was a grumpy pout.

Back on earth I'd managed to square away a half dozen girlfriends through the years, but I don't even know if they count any more, what with me being dead there and all. I kind of hope that they don't count. I was never the best boyfriend, even when I was trying my hardest. Which, on reflection, wasn't nearly often enough.

The smart play on her part would be side-stepping around the outside of my shield, so I lined up the little arming-blade that I'd been left with after stripping off all the metal for my shield. Pointing the thrusting tip towards that empty air and waiting. If she took the dumb side, the side with the sword on it, then I was still positioned in such a way that I'd be able to lash out and knock her back before she could press in close enough to do me any serious damage. It was win-win.

She came over the top of the shield in one leaping bound, one foot touching off the top edge of it for extra height, and to slam it down into the ground, wrecking my balance. That was a first.

Without the rote training for this kind of attack, I fell back on instinct. Jerking up the arming blade to catch one of the descending shimmers of pointy murder. I turned it aside while the other still lanced forward, going for my throat.

Luck saved me then, the way it had a good few times too many in the past. When I jerked my head around to see death coming, my horn hit the side of the thrusting blade, changing the destination of that razor sharp point away from throat town on a detour into empty air.

The full weight of my would-be-stabber slammed into my face and chest then, but if she'd expected me to flinch, she was in for a shock. Having alvaren pressed against my face was one of my favorite pastimes. I slammed my forehead into her with all the bunched muscles of my bullish neck and set her rolling back to a safer distance while I retrieved my shield from where it still stood wedged in the ground.

Even as I reached for it, it had started shrinking, the metal flowing away and reshaping. By the time I made contact with the handle it had dwindled down into a hunk of metal no bigger than was in my other hand. A matching pair of cleavers. Two swords, just like her.

I feel like I'm entitled to a fresh start. So that makes my super-hot, blonde, Alvaren girlfriend my very first girlfriend. You might think that my very first girlfriend on this planet trying to slice my head off probably wasn't a good sign for the longevity of our relationship, but you'd be wrong. This was a massive step up from when I'd first met her.

Seren was back on her feet in some sort of elegant roll-backflip combo thing that bewildered me. She spun her blades and darted back in, hungry for first blood.

Even with the lighter cleavers I was slower than her, sluggish looking compared to the impossible grace of Alvaren, but I didn't need to be faster when I knew where every blow was going to fall. I'd been watching Alvaren fight since I first landed on Amaranth, or at least after I'd brought the species back from the special goblin-hell that their queen had dumped them in, and I knew their moves now.

Every one of them trained relentlessly for centuries to fight perfectly, but that perfection was a carbon-copy of everyone else's. Once you could beat one of them, you could beat all of them.

It was really a shame I hadn't quite worked out how to beat a single one of them yet.

She came in hard and fast as always, not over-committing, but pushing to see my limits. I had a better reach than her, my cleavers ran longer than the needle blades of hers despite their heft and one of my arms was almost the size of her whole body. I just had to use that, hold her back out of striking distance and wear her down.

It might not have looked like it to the audience of gathered dvergar where they were lounging around the jungle clearing taking bets, but even though I was staggering and a bit beleaguered, I wasn't actually tiring. I couldn't. It was a faun thing. We didn't get tired.

I just had to outlast a swordswoman who'd been committing murder on a professional level since before the human race had crawled out of our caves back on earth. Easy.

The first few strokes of her blade were coordinated, one razor edge chasing the other as she spun. Both chipped off one cleaver, leaving my other one free to sweep uselessly through the space where she'd stood. A moment too late.

She took to the air again, springing over that swing, spinning still, and forcing me to duck or risk lose my face.

Touching down, she pounced back in at me. That would have been me dead again, but the flats of my cleavers were broad enough to serve as little shields when I swept them around. Turning the thrusts away. Almost like I made them that way on purpose.

There was no time to make my own attack while that had her off balance. That was the thing you noticed with the Alvaren, that thing that made them look like they were so damned graceful, they weren't making a move and then making another once you'd done something. There was no stutter, no pause, one motion flowed into the next. It was all one move. Like everything that they were doing was a dance and you were just in the middle of it. In the middle of a dance that nobody had taught you the steps to.

It looked like it was time to get down to business when she strode back in again, and the baying dvergar could tell too. They started hooting and hollering as the fight went from dramatic to methodical.

A thrust, a parry, a feign, a cut, a riposte.

Each of the alvaren's hands moved independently of the other. Each of them working me through a full fencing routine. Two full fencing routines at once. All things considered, I feel like I held up pretty well. Like I was dancing too. Moving back and forth across the packed dirt beneath out feet with some measure of competence that I didn't really feel like I'd earned.

Most of her feigns were at my face, most of her real strikes at my body. Almost like she was scared to mess up my pretty face. That, or she wanted to make me extra distracted as I had to concentrate on not peeing myself every time a needle sharp blade tip came at my eyeballs. Probably that.

I had strength on my side. Though it probably wasn't that obvious given how fast she could recover, every time I slapped one of her attacks wide with the flat of a cleaver, the force was almost enough to jerk the weapon out of her hand. I wasn't trying to win by overpowering her, but I wasn't trying to lose either. I was always going to be stronger than pretty much anything vaguely human shaped, and acting like I wasn't wouldn't teach me how to fight better.

Her rhythm picked up once she'd rattle through a few of her attack routines until her hands were a blur. She kept me stepping back, ran me in circles around the clearing, hoping I'd trip over a protruding rock or root like I'd done so many times before. It wasn't happening today. Not today.

When my moment came, I almost missed it. Both of her swords had lanced in at me from different directions and I'd had to flip a cleaver in my left hand to catch the low thrust. If I'd been watching the swords, I probably would have missed it, but by then I'd won enough confidence to meet her eyes. I saw the moment of surprise when she realised that she'd over-committed.

I surged forward, slamming one arm down and one up. Pinning her at the shoulders by the opposing forces knocking her blades out even wider.

We were face to face now as she lifted off the ground. I flicked my head as I reared back, hooking a horn under her helm and flinging it across the clearing. Her golden hair tumbled out and down her back. Her eyes narrowed to brace against the impact.

Across my shoulders and my neck those same colossal muscles I'd used to butt her across the clearing tensed once more and then I hammered forward.

Her eyes closed, her whole body tensed against the impact.

I place a gentle kiss on her lips. Barely a brush of skin.

*Victory!*

*Vitality increased to 19*

*Phalanx: Rank 8/10*

*128 Experience Gained*

"Maulkin!" Seren's eyes snapped open and a blue-flush spread across her face as the dvergar began to roar with laughter around the edges of the clearing. This was better than I could have ever hoped

for. I'd done worse than beat her. I'd embarrassed her. Oh man. She was going to kick my ass all around this clearing when the morning came.

With a grin I dropped her back down on her feet. "Best two out of three?"

She retrieved her helm and tucked it under one arm, carefully avoiding the gaze of the dvergar who'd now moved on from cheering and jeering to exchanging money. After a losing streak of a month, the odds on me must have been really bad. If I'd had any idea that I might actually win a bout I would have asked Mercy to put some gold on me.

"I believe that will be sufficient for today." Her eyes were still narrowed and she spoke as stiffly as she didn't move. I didn't know if she genuinely didn't ache after these sessions, or if she was just faking it, but I envied her. I'd be sore for the rest of the day. "You are much improved on the reckless ravaging beast that I first encountered a moon back. Given a few more years training, perhaps you might make a passable foot-soldier."

I snorted with laughter. "I got you."

"You have come close enough to land a disabling blow. Once." She smiled at me frostily. "Once out of how many bouts?"

There was no way I was letting a little thing like a twenty eight day losing streak get me down now. This was a day for celebration. I'd finally won. All the training and practice and exercises and... everything I'd been devoting the last month of my life to finally coming to fruition. "But you admit I got you?"

She strode to the edge of the clearing and attempted to hide the satisfaction on her face as the dvergar scattered out of her way. She called back over her shoulder. "There can be no denying that if we wish to see the Voidgod kissed, you are the Eternal for the job."

I stomped after her, giving my adoring fans a wave as I went. About ninety percent of the crowd were scowling at me for taking easy money out of their pockets.

Our little dirt circle was way out in the jungle. Everything on this island was way out in the jungle, if you wanted to nitpick, but from the tower where we lived, this particular bit; way out. As we made our way back to the tower and the village grown up out of the ruins at its feet, it was like moving backwards in time through my day. At the end of every day was the circle of mud where Seren kicked me around after every willing dvergar had tried their luck. Further back there was this obstacle course.

Tree stumps jutted up at odd heights throughout the long half-empty channel of partially cleared forest we moved through next. For the first few weeks I'd hated this bit. Bouncing on the balls of my feet from one stump-top to the other, constantly on the verge of overbalancing, even when I was doing everything right. Did you know that Faun are top heavy? As a species we look like we've been skipping leg day for centuries and the big honking horns on the sides of my head didn't help either.

After the second week when it looked I had the hung of it, Seren had recruited Mercy to shoot at me as I went. Arrows without heads that stung when they hit, knocked me off balance, but didn't actually do much damage. The problem wasn't that I was bad at getting out of the way, the problem

was that Mercy was a really good shot. Seren knew that. The point wasn't for me to dodge, it was for me to keep balance while getting shot. Took me a while to work that one out.

With her languid, gliding strides, Seren had already passed through this whole section of the obstacle course by the time that I spotted her. Was this still part of my daily work out? I broke into a run.

Next was the acrobatics section of the course. Meant to exhaust me before I could even get started on the balancing act. It never worked. There were climbing walls. Tunnels dug down under the roots of the forest. All the stuff that made outdoorsy people back on Earth salivate with excitement and people like me wonder what the point was.

Seren had informed me that the point was "getting accustomed to my new body." The same reason that she had me strip down and swim a mile along the coastline every other day before we started on this whole routine. Personally, I think she was just perving on me. Like when she had me lifting the weights we passed next.

We were just shy of the long winding path back from our little corner of heaven to the village when I caught up to her and tackled her around the waist. Swept off her feet and spun around and around, she couldn't help smiling. Just a little. That tiny secret smile that she seemed to save just for me. I had to ruin the moment, of course. "If you'd prefer for me to spank you instead of kissing you next time I beat you, that can be arranged."

I didn't even see her drawing her sword before the tip of it flicked up to prick the underside of my chin. "Perhaps we should find a better use for that mouth of yours."

She was trying to be intimidating, but there was no stopping the grin that spread over my face now. "And what might that be?"

An arrow shot along the forest path and passed between our faces.

I dropped Seren, and we had both jerked back into combat readiness before we heard Mercy braying. "No making out in the forest! That's how you get woodlice."

I eased my reconstituted great-sword back into its baldric. "Mercy, I swear to the gods..."

"I was just coming to get you two. Dinner is ready, and Asher... well it sounds like he might come out of the tower."

That was exciting enough news that I stopped bitching about how close I came to an eyebrow piercing. "Holy crap."

"I know, right! One of the dvergar he tricked into fetching and tidying in the library said that he was making noises all day. Like... Eureka kind of noises."

I caught Seren by the hand and dragged her along as she was still trying to gather the exact words with which to eviscerate Mercy for shooting at us as a joke. "It occurs that thy compatriots are somewhat blasé about attempted murder. Perhaps because of how impermanent the state of death is for your kind."

“She wasn’t trying to hit you.” She was literally digging her heels in, so I stopped yanking on her arm in case it came off. Seren reached up and turned my face to her again, keeping my attention on her. Like I’d go all weak at the knees and dumb just because... Okay actually yeah she was that pretty.

“When arrows are loosed, there is always a danger. Danger she seems blind to, simply because it has no lasting meaning to either of you.”

I didn’t try to look away but I did blink hard so I could get my thoughts back together. “Even if you somehow got hit, I’d heal you! Nothing to worry about.”

Still she cradled my cheek. “That arrow passed within an inch of my eye. You cannot raise the dead.”

“Not yet.” I gave her my patented cheeky grin again, but it completely failed to have the desired effect.

“Do you have no care for how my lifeblood is spent at all?” She cast her eyes down and I realised that this wasn’t just predictable bitterness about me beating her making her switch to another avenue of attack. It was genuine worry. Genuine fear, not of dying – I knew her too well to consider that she was scared of dying – but of dying to some stupid, pointless accident.

I groaned and felt like an asshole. “Alright. Alright. I’m sorry. You’re right. I’ll tell her off, okay?”

“And what of you, will you stop treating your life as a game?”

“Why would I quit while I’m winning?”

This time the grin seemed to do the trick. She fell into step beside me, even letting me put an arm around her shoulders instead of shrugging it off. “When you first asked me if I would train you in the martial arts, when you expressed your desire to move beyond mere brute force and into the realm of actual craft, it had been my hope that you would approach the matter with some seriousness.”

That actually brought me to a stop. “You don’t think I’ve been taking it seriously?”

She gave me one of those sideways looks that meant I’d said something dumber than usual. “You have been positively... gleeful.”

“It is fun!” I jostled her with my hip. “I’m meant to pretend it isn’t fun?”

“The dvergar sparring partners that you bat around as a cat toys with a ball of yarn do not take kindly to your laughter, and nor do I.”

I muffled a laugh, but not quick enough to avoid a venomous glance. “So you’re mad that I’m having a good time beating you?”

“Once. You have bested me once, and for that I would allow a certain degree of satisfaction.” Her shoulders slumped within her armor. “Frankly that concerns me less than the ‘good time’ you seem to be having when I am besting you.”

“If this is about the time I grabbed you by the uh chest when we were sparring...”

She slapped a hand over my mouth, blue tinging her cheeks. “That... matter... requires no further discussion. My concern is that it does not seem to irk you when you are defeated. No matter how badly I thwart your efforts, you seem untroubled.”

“Well, yeah.” I shrugged. “I’m learning. I don’t expect to win every single time while I’m still learning.”

“You are not... you are not a child in a classroom. You are a soldier, fighting a war against the most dangerous foe that this world has ever known. Against a multitude of enemies so powerful that they are thought by most to be legend, yet your attitude is that of a man without concerns.”

We emerged from the forest into the village. And it was a proper dvergar village now. A month of non-stop construction work had transformed it from the abandoned ruins we’d found when we first landed on this island. The old outhouses of Talon’s Keep were still there beneath the wooden structures that had been built around them, but they served more as foundations than structures in themselves.

Everywhere that you turned your head there was industry. A great mound of dirt to the east marked the beginnings of the mine that would make this place a true home to the dvergar, but even that mound was not sitting idle. The soil was sifted for anything of value, then the dirt itself was used to build the raised plateaus of farmland over where the trees had been cleared back.

It had been generations since the dvergar grew food beneath the sun of the surface, maybe these ones never had, but Asher’s never-ending book heap had filled them in on any of the technical details that they were missing.

The forges plumed smoke into the sky, staining the pale stone of the tower where it brushed by with soot. I’m sure Talon would have been pissed about us making a mess of his tower but he was too dead to complain and I kind of liked having the place a little bit messy. It made this place look lived-in. After seeing so much of Amaranth as a dead husk of a planet where civilization had dried up and blown away, some soot stains were a welcome reminder that we were still here.

I smiled down at Seren and placed another gentle kiss on her forehead. “Worrying isn’t going to change anything. It isn’t going to make me stronger. It isn’t going to make the quest any less... big. It would just make me sad.”

“I cannot for the life of me decipher whether you are a philosopher of great wisdom or an utter buffoon.”

Mercy called over from the cook-fire. “Oh, don’t let him fool you. He’s a moron.”

“Love you too, Mercy!”

She turned back to the dvergar that always seemed to be clustered around her with a scowl. This time they were begrudgingly handing her money. I guess she’d been betting on me after all. Gambling seemed to be the only thing that the dvergar actually kept money for. Maybe it was different when they’d lived in their old city, but I hadn’t seen much sign of it then either.

Gunhild ambled over to nudge me in the knee, smirking so hard I was worried she’d hurt herself. “Did you be winning for a change?”

I took one look at that smile and sighed, “You had money on me too?”

She let out a loud chortle, then leaned in closer to grumble. "You cost me dear, but it'll be giving me better odds when I be betting against you tomorrow, and I'll wager that little lass of yours has something to prove now."

Gunhild was right of course. Even if Seren said she wasn't mad. I was going to get poked a lot tomorrow.

While she hadn't actually killed me yet, I'd spent the last of my Glory ahead of our first training session just in case she got carried away and I ended up popping back to life at my shrine over by the tower. I wasn't too dumb to admit that maybe Seren was right about me being a bit casual about dying, given that the worst consequences of her cutting my head off would be that I wouldn't have to walk so far to get back for dinner.

Around dinner time I usually got jovial ribbing from whichever of the dvergar had volunteered to join in my training that day. After getting patted about with the flat of my sword for hours on end, the sight of Seren kicking my ass usually gave them some much needed catharsis. Today a couple of them tried it with Seren and got treated to that same blank serial killer stare she used to give me every time I spoke. It stopped pretty promptly after that.

Even if Seren hadn't been her usual prickly self, things felt strange. Like the quiet before the storm. The news that Asher's endless research had finally borne fruit had spread much further than just our ears. People kept spilling their stew because they were too busy staring at the door of the tower. Just waiting for him to finally emerged. By the time that the bottles of post-dinner drinks were being cracked open, I was about ready to climb up the tower and drag him out by his tail myself.

I met Mercy's gaze across the fire and she just shrugged. I looked to Seren and she gave me a blank stare. It was possible that there would not be any smooching happening in the tower this evening. I had to acknowledge that possibility, even if I didn't like it.

Just when my patience was running out, I caught a glimpse of him coming down the stairs. I stood up to go over and meet him, then thought better of it. Sitting down again with enough force that the dvergar on the far end of the log bench popped up in the air. Oops.

It was a testament to how weird the energy was in the village that I was still on my first serving of stew, nudging it around in circles. Technically we didn't need to eat, as Eternals, but I was still in the habit from back on Earth. And when we didn't eat the dvergar would get antsy. They were big on communal meals. Big on food as a love language. That was why some of the only things they'd saved from Khag Mhor before it crumbled into a pit in the ground were cooking pots and chests of spices. Anyway, they took it as a personal insult if you wouldn't eat with them. So we ate.

All of us except Asher, up in his tower. The Dvergar hadn't taken offence at that for some reason. I'd heard some of them talking about him when they thought I couldn't hear them. Consumed, was the word they used. Or maybe it was obsessed. The word didn't translate directly. My brain grasped the meaning, but I couldn't have said it in any other language than dvergar.

He had spent all of this time in Talon's library, where he'd been sequestered for so long that I half expected the color to have faded from his scales when he finally emerged, blinking, into the firelight. He still remembered how to speak at least. "Greetings to you, my friends."

Mercy just couldn't help herself. "Look who finally worked out how stairs work."



“My apologies for the long absence,” His head actually bobbed down like he was embarrassed. As though the rest of us hadn’t been having a holiday while he did all the mental heavy lifting. “But I am sure that you shall find my investment of time paid off in full.”

That perked me up in an instant. “You’ve found the location of the rest of the Shards?”

“Ah.” His scaly snout pointed back down to the ground and his tail swished. “No.”

Mercy snapped her fingers. “But you’ve found a way to find them?”

“Also no.”

I leapt to my feet in excitement. “You’ve found a spell to blow up the Voidgod?!”

“Once more, that is a no.”

Gunhild piped up. “You’ve found out where old Talon be hiding his liquor?”

Asher’s tail was really lashing with irritation now. “I regret to say that I wasn’t even looking for something along those lines.”

Seren joined in the game. “Perchance thy has uncovered some great an ancient secret that might prevent the restoration of the Voidgod?”

Asher trudged over and sank to his haunches beside the fire. “Alas I cannot say that I have discovered any such thing.”

“Guys, can we all stop guessing and let him tell us?” Mercy flopped back over the log bench like a puppet with cut strings. “Before we die of old age?!”

I added my little contribution to the time-wasting. “We don’t age.”

Mercy’s head popped back up to scowl at me. “But still, somehow, I can feel wrinkles appearing the longer that this drags on...”

Asher cut us off. “I have discovered the secret of the Waystones.”

The collected dvergar looked at him blankly and I have to admit it took me a minute to catch up to what he was saying too. “The big floaty ring things?”

“The network that allowed instantaneous travel throughout Amaranth through arcane power, yes.” He hadn’t even groaned, I must have been losing my touch.

Seren asked, ever so politely, “Were you not meant to be researching the shards?”

“Even for a devoted researcher such as myself, there reaches a point when one must accept that a hundred corroborating sources are providing all that there is to be had.” Asher slumped a little in the face of the question. It seemed to take a lot of effort to lift his head back up and meet our collective gaze. “From our earlier efforts we have ascertained that the Great Wyrm Tsangaanax holds both his own and the dvergar shard and that the human shard has been passed down to the ruler of the Shattered Bastion. That left only the Faun shard to trace and it seems that they have an oral tradition rather than a written one.”

Mercy piped up, “So they spend all of their time down on their knees...”

Asher cut her off neatly. "Reciting tales of their history to one another."

"So what?" I was perplexed. "Nobody else ever listened in on story time?"

"It would appear that the famously loathed and insular race of the Chagnar Faun were not inclined to share their sacred secret legendarium with any traveler who happened by." Asher scoffed. "I can find few references to the Faun at all in the collected records here, and almost always in the context of warfare being waged upon them so that areas they held might become... civilized."

There was a dull silence around the fire for a long moment, when we could all hear the crackle of the wood, the soft clunk of spoons in bowls. They were all waiting for me to launch into another rant about the poor misunderstood Faun and I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

Did it suck that a whole race had been written off by the world of Amaranth? Of course it did. Would shouting about it make a difference? Not right now.

When it became apparent that I was shutting up for the first time in living memory, Asher pushed on. "Perhaps I might direct your attention back to the fact that we can now be instantaneously transported anywhere in the world that is connected to our waystone network? Potentially eliminating months of travelling time, and even permitting us a swift return to the field should we be defeated in combat."

"Never going to happen." I shared a grin with Seren and Mercy. Mercy hadn't joined us every day for training, most of her training time had been spent alone in the woods, hunting for the dvergar. Sneaking and shooting, like she did best. It was all towards the same goal though. "That's what we've been doing while you've been reading. Practicing. Training. Honing our skills. The next time we run into a fight, there isn't going to be any of the old frantic slap and zap."

Asher clapped his scaly hands together. "Then let us put your training to good use at last."

Oh no. He meant right now. I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready yet. I hadn't worked out how to hide my little problem yet. "Do we even know where any of the floaty ring things lead though?"

"While it seems inevitable that some of the arcane nexus Talon bound into the chains have broken down over time, he left a full accounting of every place that the stones were raised. The coverage is not expansive, but nor did it stretch into those unknown areas where it is liable to have fallen into hostile hands. Several sites of interest to our quest are close by to the chain."

Mercy piped up with her own complaint, gods bless her. "What if there are broken stones in the chain? Does that mean we're all going to get turned into jelly if we try to go through?"

But Asher had an answer for that too. "It struck me that we could not be entirely certain of the extent to which the chain was intact, so I examined Talon's notation on the subject. It seems that you would simply be ejected from the last intact waystone."

"So it will just spit us out into the ocean?" I tried as hard as I could to make it sound like I was upset about the idea instead of excited about a giant magic waterslide.

"My expectation is that none of the waystones set out in the water will have been subjected to much in the way of interference, yet nonetheless, I do believe that it would be wise for us to send a

single volunteer through first, so that they might identify any trouble that may lay in wait on the other side of the stones.”

All eyes turned to me then. I had no idea why I had this reputation for suicidal bravery, but he'd said volunteer and I was not volunteering for a damn thing.

I wasn't volunteering to go out into the world and explore, and maybe fight monsters and unlock awesome new powers. I wasn't volunteering to ride the giant magic water-slide. I wasn't volunteering for any of it. I wasn't signing up for anything except another month of chilling on a tropical island with my hot Alvaren girlfriend.

My last desperate attempt to dodge this bullet squeaked out of me while the collective stare of the whole village burrowed into the side of my head. Judging me for not volunteering to shoot myself through the cannon and see where I landed. Dammit. Even I couldn't make it sound like that wasn't fun. “Do you know if this spell you've found even actually works?”

“The theoretical elements are all sound, but it shall only be through casting that we will be entirely certain of its success.” He turned to stare at me, just like everyone else. “Once we have a volunteer to pass through the gate.”

Once again, the sound of the crackling fire rose up to fill the silence. Night birds called out among the trees. High above us, the wild winds that Talon's storm-butterflies kicked up were whistling. Everyone was staring at me in annoyed silence.

Mercy was the one to break the silence. Predictably. “Okay what the hell?”

“What?”

“Don't what, me! What, you! What are you doing!?”

“Nothing!”

“Exactly! Before we beat Talon you were like... the fuel in the engine of this whole thing. You were raring to go, all day every day. Willing to do whatever you had to do to get out there and find the shards and beat the bad guys and now... what? You just want to sit?”

“I've been busy. We've all been busy. We've been training!”

“Oh bull. We didn't need training before, we don't need it now. You just wanted an excuse to get sweaty with Seren all day.”

Seren turned almost entirely blue, but said nothing.

Meanwhile, I got angry on her behalf. “We got lucky! We're up against big scary things now. Tsangaanax made Talon into his bitch without even breaking a sweat, and that guy was a super powerful wizard dude. We're trying to save the world, we can't just hope things are going to keep going our way.”

Asher nodded approvingly at my sentiment, and that was when I knew for sure that I'd gone too far.

Mercy's jaw hung open. “Who the hell are you and what have you done with Maulkin?”

“Oh come on. Just because I think that we should spend a little time preparing instead of throwing ourselves headlong into trouble, you think that I’ve been pod-person-ed?” Try as I might, I just wasn’t a good enough liar to convince anyone that I wanted the opposite of what I really wanted.

I wanted to get back out there. I wanted to go find the rest of the shards, slap them together and then beat in Araphel’s blank spooky face with it. I wanted that more than anything. But if things got rough out there I had no idea how I was going to keep my dirty little secret.

Mercy was on her feet now. Pointing an accusatory finger at me. “Maulkin would have been bouncing up and down on the spot if you told him he got to go through a magic portal that might dump him in the middle of the sea. Maulkin would think that was fun. Maulkin would have already made up three excuses for why he was the best choice to go.”

The reasons were already on the tip of my tongue before she even said it. “I mean, with my stats, I would survive for longer if I got dumped in the sea, maybe long enough to swim to safety, and I don’t really lose anything if I die since all my Glory is already invested. And I can remake my gear from nothing when I respawn.”

Mercy grinned. “Starting to sound like Maulkin again...”

“But I just think that we should be cautious.”

“By the gods,” Seren gawked at me too. Glad that attention was no longer pointed her way. “Did you truly just flinch when you said ‘cautious.’ Like it was a dirty word?”

“I... I...” Suddenly the effort of lying to them all was too much for me. I was going mad sitting around here, knowing that somewhere out there Araphel was crawling back to life while I twiddled my thumbs. More than that though, I was so deeply bored. We had been doing the same thing for a month. Every day, getting up, exercising. Training. I felt like my brain was crawling up the insides of my skull. If it hadn’t been for the variety of interesting things that me and Seren did in the bedroom we’d claimed up in the tower these past few weeks I probably would have thrown myself in the sea and tried to swim to the Shattered Bastion by myself. With something like a sob I broke down. “I want to get shot out the magic cannon into the sea.”

Mercy grabbed me by the shoulders and cheered. “There’s my big dumb guy!”

They were getting what they wanted. They were getting big dumb Maulkin throwing himself into trouble. They should have been satisfied, but Asher was still looking at me with a quizzical tilt to his head. He was suspicious. That same methodical brain that had been chipping through all the mysteries of Amaranth had just added why I was acting funny to his to-solve list. Great.

Okay, full disclosure. I might have done something really dumb. I make a lot of impulse decisions and normally they work out great. They’re how I ended up as a big buff faun with a big choppy sword, spending the rest of my eternity on a bitching awesome dungeon crawl. They’re how I got all my cool powers. They’re also how I ended up with my dirty little secret.

Technically speaking, I wasn’t a Lunar Eternal any more, at least, not just a Lunar Eternal. As I’d bound more and more shards of the Rusted Blade to my soul, it had started to change me. The moonlight inside me had started to dim. The glow in my eyes had faded until you could barely see it. I could almost pass for a normal Faun if nobody looked too closely at them. Most importantly, the

mark on my soul that the gods had inscribed to say “This guy is on team moon,” had been vandalized with a little scribble that added, “and team Voidgod.”

When I first landed on this rock, me, Asher and Mercy were not besties. The fact that I was a Lunar Eternal while they were Solar ones, it was almost enough to put them at my throat right up front. Even as we’ve gotten to know each other and they’ve come to recognize that I’m cool as hell, there have still been little moments where they didn’t trust me, just because I serve the primordial pantheon of chaos instead of the prissy sunshine order like them.

By the end of our little quest to grab Talon’s shard, I was pretty sure that all of that was behind us though. That they finally trusted me, and recognized that Lunar and Solar Eternals could hold hands and frolic and junk. If they knew that I’d been signed up to the Voidgod softball team, that trust was going to evaporate pretty damned fast.

As if that little mark on my soul wasn’t scary and confusing enough, the Pillars of Divinity which gave me all my godly powers had doubled in number, with every pretty sparkly pillar reflected with a dark counterpart. And that should have been that. That really should have been that. If I had just stopped then and there, I wouldn’t have any problem keeping the dark pillars or my additional affiliation a secret from everyone else.

The problem was, some of those void powers sounded freaking awesome.

For every ability that let me create something or heal somebody in the Lunar Pillars, there was an equal and opposite reaction in the Void Pillars. My ability to build equipment out of raw materials with just a thought? What about disassembling the armor my enemies were wearing? Healing with a touch? What about draining the life out of somebody instead?

It was like somebody had taken all the awesome powers that me and the other baby godlings could tap into and then created the heavy metal version of them. I wanted them so bad.

So I made my stupid impulsive decision, when I had to sink the last of my Glory into something before going off to train with Seren for the first time, I ignored all of the perfectly good, not-going-to-ruin-my-life, options and went straight for those sweet succulent void pillars.

Look, I never said I was smart. I’ve never even implied it. In fact, you could probably take a look at everything that I’ve ever said and done, and sum it up as, “Damn, this guy is dumb as a sack of rocks.”

So I was more than a little uncomfortable about Asher’s scrutiny, and I spent the rest of the evening sidling my way around the fire doing my best to avoid getting sucked into a private conversation with him, because even though he might have had all the emotional insight of a coconut, he was also doggedly persistent when he thought that there might be an answer to one of his puzzles.

Luckily for me, I had a built in excuse to go sidling away from the cookfire long before everyone was drunk and singing like usual. I caught Seren’s eye across the fire and waggled my eyebrows at her. She didn’t smile, those were still rare little treats that were usually reserved for in private, but she did give me a little nod of acknowledgement and slipped away from the conversation going on around her, but never including her.

I stood up to follow her a moment later, telling everyone I was sleepy and needed my energy for being zapped through space and time by Asher come morning. They let me go without much resistance, even if they did usually enjoy watching me get drunk and abuse my Artifice powers for entertainment purposes.

At the tower entrance, Mercy was waiting with her arms crossed. "Took you long enough."

"Have you been waiting there this whole time?"

"No." She rose up to her full height, trying to meet my gaze eye to eye and mostly managing eye to chin. "Just since I noticed you were trying not to talk to me or Asher."

She noticed that. Of course she noticed that. "Well, you guys were being weird."

"No, don't do that." She strode in closer, now we were seeing eye to nipple. "Don't try to turn this around on us. You are being weird. Really weird. And I'm used to your usual weird. Gods help me, sometimes I kind of like your usual weird. But this is a new weird. Weird even for you."

"Weirder than saying weird fifteen times in a row?"

She was close enough now that I had to squat a little bit to hear her hissing, "I can and will kick you directly in your boy-parts."

I regretted squatting. That made her target so much easier to hit. "Just chill out! I didn't see you volunteering to get launched through Asher's magic catapult."

"Yeah, because if I did, that would be weird." She stomped back into the tower and sat down on the stone bench we'd made out of dead golem parts. "But you not volunteering? That is bizarre! From the second that we crawled out our graves, you've been in a mad panic to chase after the shards and now you just want to kick back? What happened to you? What changed?"

"Nothing changed! Araphel still needs his ass kicked. I just..." Screwed up and absorbed too much of his evil essence and might be turning into a Voidgod myself. "...thought we could all do with a little breather."

"So you really, really, just wanted to lounge around for a month with your new girlfriend?"

"Is that so hard to believe?" I pointed up the stairs after Seren. She was probably already up there, waiting for me. "She's really hot!"

"Okay, first of all; ew." She counted them off on her fingers. "Second; I am like, ninety percent hotter than blonde brat, and I'm not an elf-supremacist psycho."

"So what, you're jealous?" I wagged my eyebrows at her. "You wanted some Maulkin for yourself?"

"And we're back to, ew, again." She counted that on her fingers too. Was she counting every ew?

"No, you are gross. You know you're gross. I just wanted to make it clear so that you know..."

I gave her an incredulous look. "That you're hotter than my girlfriend?"

"I am, but I'm only telling you that in a purely objective way that has nothing to do with wanting anything to do with your rhino-looking ass." She pointed her counting finger in accusation. "And

don't think I didn't notice you skipping over the fact you're your sweet little Seren thinks we're all subhuman just because we don't have pointy ears like her."

"That isn't fair." I shifted uncomfortably. Mercy needed to stop being right on the money. It was getting annoying. "She's getting better."

She let out a completely mirthless laugh. "Yeah she hardly even looks like she wants to spit on the dvergar anymore."

I slumped down onto the bench beside her so that I could keep my voice down. Those pointed ears on Seren weren't just for show, and sound echoed right up this tower. "She grew up surrounded by people like that. No contact with anyone else outside of that cult of alvaren greatness. Is it really that surprising that she believed the same stuff as everyone else she grew up with?"

"I had a racist grandma." Mercy rolled her eyes. "Didn't make me racist."

"So did I, goes with grandma territory I guess?" Mercy looked ready to interrupt but I talked over her little self-congratulation dance. "But I didn't grow up in crazy-elf-Nazi-land and neither did you. She's doing better than she was. Okay? Sometimes she might fall back on... how she's been brought up, but that isn't her. It isn't all of her."

For a long moment, Mercy sat there in sullen silence, then, just when I was getting up to go upstairs and try to find some tiny sliver of joy in the evening she stopped me with a boot stuck out in my path. "Don't think I didn't see what you did there, turning the conversation into something about her instead of telling me what is actually wrong with you. You know I don't like it when you keep secrets from me, Maulkin. And I don't like being lied to."

I stepped over her leg, and she raised the other one. "Who is lying to you?"

"This isn't over." She tried to lock her legs around my shin but I jumped out and half staggered over to the stairs as she called after me. "You're going to tell me what is going on."

I shouted back over my shoulder. "I've got no idea what you're talking about."

"You're a bad liar."

The steps vanished beneath my stride, three at a time. "I must be an awful liar if I don't even know I'm lying."

As I rounded the corner and out of sight, she yelled. "I've got my eye on you."

I took a couple of steps back down the stairs so she could see me from the waist down. Then I wiggled my hips. "On my rhino-looking ass?"

"Ew."

I wonder if she counted that one too.

## Chapter 2

The sun rose, the dvergar got to work as noisily as ever, and I walked out to meet the whole gang over at the shore. The island was pretty thoroughly mapped by this point, both by the dvergar laying out their expansion plans and by me and the other eternal hunters hunting down what was left of the chameleon lizardman assassin beasties that were still running wild. In none of that mapping did any of us come across a big stone pillar and a floaty ring thing, making the one on the distant horizon, pointing back along the route we'd taken from Witchglass Overlook into the one and only waystone relay that was feasibly accessible.

Asher worked out almost as soon as we arrived on the beach that it would have been easier to line up an angle on the floaty ring from one of the upper rooms in Talon's Keep, but none of us could be bothered wasting any more of the morning hiking back and forth through the sweltering forest. Instead he set to work, checking and double checking the incantation that would bring the ancient magic to life while the rest of us twiddled our thumbs.

Seren had come down to the beach to see me off in an uncharacteristic display of sentimentality, but the longer the delay stretched on, the more awkward having her standing around seemed. While I was here, she had something to focus her attentions on, she'd been so delighted when I asked her to train me and no small part of that was that it took her away from everyone else. When she was busy with me it was easy for her to ignore the fact that everyone else on the island kind of hated her.

In a weird way, kicking my ass every day had been helping her to fit in. For all their talk of being a peaceful people the dvergar loved to watch a fight, and they particularly loved to watch some waif of a woman tossing around a giant of a man like he was an empty sack. She didn't have friends among the dvergar, but they had some respect for her skills, and maybe a bit of a fan club. Watching her from afar.

Without me she was going to be left lingering. There was work here for farmers and miners, for builders and planners, but warriors? There was no requirement for them. We'd seen to that when we cleared the island of anything that looked even vaguely hostile. I didn't even know if Mercy and Asher would talk to her when I was gone. I mean, Asher might ask her a relentless barrage of questions to try and get more information about whatever he was obsessing about at any given moment, but it wasn't the same as having a conversation with her like she was an actual person.

She gave me a chaste kiss on the cheek and then stepped back. "I shall be awaiting thy return with baited breath."

"Miss you too."

After cross-referencing three different scrolls and two books Asher ushered me to stand between him and the floating ring poking up over the horizon. "Our set target is the Shattered Bastion, but if the spell should falter, do your best to discover nearby landmarks before you expire so that we can determine the reach of the undamaged waystones." I must have been looking a bit nervous, because he tried to smile at me. Showing rows of pointed teeth. Then he said the least comforting thing



imaginable. "This should be entirely painless, so if you do experience any discomfort, please alert me, as it may mean something has gone awry."

"Dude, you're about to lightning-bolt pea-shooter me across the world." When I laughed it had a manic edge to it. "That's a first for me. I don't know what it is meant to feel like."

Mercy grinned, "I hope it hurts like hell. Proper camel through the eye of a needle stuff. Squirting."

"Want to swap places?"

She scoffed. "And miss out on another riveting day of sunbathing?"

When I turned back to Asher for moral support I realized he was already in the middle of casting. Oh crap. Glancing up at Seren, I saw her raising a hand to wave goodbye, then abruptly, she was gone.

Have you ever had every molecule of your body torn apart by wild magic and flung through the air? Do you have any idea what that feels like? Me neither. It all happened too fast for me to notice. One minute I was standing there on the beach, the next I was just... somewhere else.

That somewhere else was a courtyard, of sorts. My arrival displaced the air with the sound of a tiny thunderclap, turning every head my way. The ring of the Waystone set into the wall behind me also gave me a nice dramatic backlight as it glowed a dazzling green for a moment before fading back to grey.

The walls around the courtyard had been made from solid stone once upon a time. Not bricks, but great sheets of rock dragged up into place and carved into the shape that was required. That had been once upon a time. Age and some terrible cataclysm had rent those walls, left the stone bubbled and melted at the edges of the damage. Somebody had patched the hole with clay brickwork now, but it stuck out enough that I noticed that wedge of terracotta before I noticed that there were a dozen armed men screaming all around me.

Humans. The first ones I'd seen since I landed on this rock. It was almost enough to bring a tear to my eye to see another human being. Mercy didn't count.

Bells started ringing up on the walls above us, and a cry echoed out through the castle beyond. "The enemy have breached the center yard!"

I spun around, looking for whatever enemy were bothering my little human buddies and then I realized who they were talking about. "Oh! Oh no. Guys I'm not your enemy! I'm human too, or at least I used to be. I mean. Let me start over..."

A crossbow bolt punched through my armor and embedded in my shoulder. Ow.

"Guys! I'm not here to fight you! I'm on your side."

Another crossbow bolt flitted down from the raised walkway along the patched wall. It would have hit me square in the face if I hadn't jerked to the side. I shouted a bit louder, since they seemed to be hard of hearing. "Could you stop shooting at me?! I'm on your side!"

The men who'd been down in the yard when I first arrived had drawn swords, axes and shields. Some of them were fussing with armor straps, others had run when I arrived, carrying the call of, "Breach!" throughout whatever building was beyond this little square.

That probably wasn't good news.

Up on the wall more guards came pouring in, fully armored in the boiled leather and chainmail that seemed to cover everybody in this place. More crossbows were levelled at me. I had both my empty hands held up at this point, but that didn't seem to do anything to slow proceedings down.

The closest of the men down in the square seemed to find his courage and he charged at me with his axe held high. After so long fighting Alvaren, he seemed almost comically slow, charging and roaring across the last few feet. I caught the axe under the head and jerked it out of his hands.

"Will you people just listen to me?! I'm not here to fight you."

Fear was all I could see on the face of the man with no axe. No recognition of the words I was saying. No hint that he even understood, though I knew that with my Eternal's gift of speaking in tongues he could understand every damn word. He scampered back out of reach in a panic, flinching away as if I was going to beat on him with his own axe. Instead I dropped it on the ground and tried to lift my empty hands again.

"Guys can you just stop for a minute? Who's in charge here?"

Despite their initial panic the men up on the walls had fallen into their training now, the front rank dropping to one knee while those behind them lined up their shots, resting the hafts of the crossbows on their buddies helms.

Oh crap.

The moment that the ex-axe-man was out of range, they unleashed a their volley of bolts at me. A solid wall of spikey death, soaring through the air.

I got my shield formed just in time. It had barely hardened before the bolts hit it, the force of the impact sending me sliding back across the dirt yard. With a blink of my eyes I shrunk the wall of raw iron back down into my sword and hefted it over my head.

It was bigger than any two of the guys who were now running at me and I could actually see the moment that their brains processed what their eyes were telling them and panic set in. Their charge turned into a skid and they tried to reverse direction, figuring out pretty fast that their little wooden shields weren't going to do much if I swung for them. Maybe now they'd listen. "Guys I'm not here to fight anybody. I just want to..."

There were two entrances to the courtyard, one leading to another open-air area opposite the red scarred wall and the other opposite the waystone, sealed with a set of iron studded doors that looked sturdy enough to stop even me from kicking my way through. Reinforcements streamed in through both of them, spilling out and forming into a right angle of battle lines. "Oh come on. Why does everybody in Amaranth want to stab first and ask questions later?!"

Pikemen came up behind the first lines and thrust their big floppy spears out to rest on the flat tops of the front rank's kite shields. This was not looking promising either. They advanced on me, step by step, shrinking the width of their line by one body each time and closing the square smaller and smaller. Driving me towards the corner of the outer wall, beneath the frantically reloading crossbowmen.

I was running out of room and running out of choices. If I didn't fight back in the next few seconds I was going to turn into a shish-ka-Maulkin. So I did the only thing I could do. I fought back.

With one sweep of my great-sword I turned aside the pikes that were thrusting at me, and before the once to either side could start thrusting in at my flanks I spun in a full circle, slamming the flat of the blade against the front ranks' shields.

There was a cacophonous gong and the soldiers flew back into the ones behind them. The whole formation fell like dominos and I leapt over them, going for the door. I needed to get out of here, get some distance and maybe find somebody in the whole place who had a couple of braincells and understood what it meant when I said "I'm not here to murder you all, please chill."

Through the door and into a corridor with the crowd of toppled soldiers braying at my back, plain stone walls stretching off as far as the eye could see, no tapestry or decoration or anything to make this place homey. Just rock. Even dvergar mines had more personality. There were doors off to either side of the corridor but I could hear footsteps slapping along behind me and I didn't fancy trying to fight in a solid stone tube I was barely small enough to fit into. Another of the reinforced doors was up ahead and I didn't like my odds of not smacking flat into it like a cartoon character.

For a couple of steps my body stumbled as my consciousness swept out of it and along the corridor as far as my sphere of influence. I could feel the lock on the door as a staticky mass in my perception. Something too complex for my Rough Hewn Architecture to touch. Good thing it was nestled in a plain stone wall really. One little push of will loosened the wall's grip on the door. Widened out enough that the deadbolt was now slotted into open air.

I banged through the now unlocked door and into another open air square. There was no patch on the outer wall of this one, though some of the next building looked a bit piecemeal, and there were no archers standing guard up on the walkway. I figured they were the reinforcements that had come tearing in to shoot at me in the last open space. Great, no crossbow bolts. It was just a pity that was balanced out by there being even more soldiers standing around on my level of this one.

There was a split second to decide whether this lot might be more susceptible to pleading, flattery and begging before I heard those slapping boots behind me closing the distance. No stopping.

Hunching up my shoulders and ducking down my head, I charged, not straight ahead to the next locked door, but for the open archway to the side. For all I knew this place was a big circle and chasing along through these walls was just going to take me back to the waystone courtyard. Time for a change of scenery.

The next courtyard in clearly hadn't started out life that way. The walls, where they stood, were still that same smooth stone, but it had started to vault up into a roof before the topside had been torn away. There were patches where you could still see the curve of it heading up before the melt swept the rest away. Most of the walls had gone the same way, ripped through by some great cataclysm and still on the waiting list for the shoddy brickwork patch-job that the outer wall had benefitted from.

If I ever got a whole second when folks weren't trying to murder me, I'd love to use Spirit Touch and work out what the hell had actually happened to this place. Guess that whole second was asking too

much. While there was nobody hanging out in this room, there was a makeshift armory set up, a little camp-fire burning in a soot blackened corner, a staff room for the guards out on the wall.

No time to think. Never any time to think. The shouts of my pursuers had been taken up by the crowd in the last courtyard and they came stampeding after me. At least this place gave me some options. I reached out into my Sphere of Influence and felt all that raw stone, just waiting for some divine attention. The archway became a wall. My closest pursuer slammed right into it, helmeted head smashing right through the thin layer of stone that I'd slapped over the gap.

For a moment I saw his face, all stubbly and grubby and full of rage, then I took off. Surging my Potency for a great bounding leap out of the room. Landing with less grace than I might have hoped for on top of the most solid looking wall.

They knew the lay of the land and I was scurrying through it like a rat in a maze. I needed some height, some perspective, somewhere that there weren't screaming dudes trying to murder my face off.

Staggering and almost tipping over into the next room I got a glimpse of the scale of the place. The outer wall that I'd been running along the inside of was not some great circle, it was basically a straight line, stretching out for as far as the eye could see in both directions. It must have gone on for miles when it was first built, but now whole sections of it were just gone, and the parts that weren't looked the worse for wear. These rooms set back from the main wall must have once formed the living quarters and store rooms, but now the few that still had walls had lost their roof and the few that had roofs seemed to be missing walls beneath. That same brutal melt had spread all across the place, bubbling away solid stone everywhere that it had touched.

From up here it became clear that the big wall used to be at least twice the height it had been left. There were jagged spurs of stone still stretching up from it, all that remained of the upper floors. Wooden slats had been roped up onto them, platforms balanced precariously as lookouts. Now that I'd spotted those, I could see the same wood everywhere. The clay bricks had been used to patch up holes where they'd been found but the rickety wood structures were clinging to the old rock like a parasite. Out the back of some of the more solid looking rooms in this row there had been halls of that same shanty-town smashed together and lashed to the stone. I could even see stairways zig-zagging up to the top of the wall where the damage was worse and the big wall's internal structures had been melted shut.

I wish I'd spotted those sooner, since soldiers were now boiling up them onto my level. No rest for the wicked. Why not give it one last try? "I'm really not here to fight you guys! This is just a misunderstanding. We're on the same side!"

The first brave soldier made the jump off the stairs and onto the cross-hatch of wall-tops. She lost her shield in the jump, but held onto that axe like it was her safety blanket. Half the size of me, she had twice as much space for her feet. What felt like a tightrope to me was just a narrow path to her, and if she fell all her buddies down there would catch her. They would not be catching me. This was not a crowd-surfing situation. Some of them were already trying to get their pikes through the fragmented wall I'd made so that they could poke at me.

I held out my arms as wide as I dared, wobbling as I did. "You don't want to talk it out?"

She didn't want to talk it out.

Coming in hard and fast, sweeping for my legs. She didn't need to kill me, just knock me off balance, and as I danced back out of reach of her hacking swings, she nearly managed it more than once.

Behind her I could see more soldiers taking the risk and making the jump. A couple wiped out, slamming face down into the wall before vanishing back down out of sight, but enough of them stuck the landing that I was starting to get worried.

Where her attacks had failed to topple me, I nearly succeeded myself when half the weight of my sword shifted into a round shield for my other arm. My arms starting to windmill as I tried to get my balance back, and the soldier probably could have had me in that moment if I wasn't vigorously windmilling a sword through the space she'd have to run into to take her swing.

In a half squat, I found my balance then surged forward, slapping my shield into her with all the weight of a Maulkin in motion behind it.

By this point, I probably should have been trying to kill these people right back, but I still entertained the vague hope that they might realize I wasn't killing them and think to themselves, 'Hey maybe he's a good guy and we should sit down and talk to him about what he's here for instead of shooting at him and stuff.'

When that soldier toppled over and fell the length of the wall to land directly on her head, that hope faded fast. Her neck snapped with a wetter sound than you'd have expected. Juicy even before blood started to spread out around her and pool at the feet of her friends.

Peace had been a longshot anyway. Everything else on Amaranth had devoted itself to murdering me, why would the first humans I met be any different.

When the next soldier rushed in to take her place, I fell into the well-worn groove of my training. Slapping the thrust out and following it with a stab to the center of mass. A quick tug to retrieve my sword and then the shield was back up in position before the next one could approach. It was picture perfect, Seren would have been so proud. Or at least she wouldn't have had some cutting remark about my performance for a change. I could do this all day, and if the folks with pikes and crossbows would have kindly thrown them away, I would have. Picking off every soldier in the place one by one.

Since I wasn't living in a perfect world where folks line up politely to be brutalized, I had to move. Running along a wall that is about as wide as your feet is kind of hard to start doing, but a lot easier once you're moving. Once you're moving, I suppose that stopping is the next big worry, but I had no intention of ever doing that, so I put it out of my mind.

Somebody should have warned the soldiers that I wasn't stopping. It came as a surprise to them when I bodied them off the wall. Slamming straight ahead with a shield that was about the same size as them and toppling them into the rooms on either side.

The rickety stairs were still packed full of soldiers that hadn't quite gotten their courage together yet, a press of bodies lower down with only a few semi-suicidal geniuses climbing up towards the top of the big wall so that gravity could help them instead of hauling them down. One made a leap right for me, misjudged it, and went straight down onto the pikes that were finally being angled up at me.

He made it almost halfway down the long shafts of wood, screaming all the way until death took him.

At least that encouraged the rest of them not to try it.

With another great leap, I cleared the distance from the closest, half-melted wall and hit the stairs. They weren't built with something my size in mind.

They really weren't built for something my size, clad in full armor, to hammer into them like a cannon-ball. Wood splintered and showered down around me.

The soldiers on the level with me had leapt out to fall, preferring the certainty of making friends with the ground to the uncertain but probably gruesome fate that being there when I landed would have brought them. There were pretty good odds I would have made them into human pâté. Not on purpose, just on impact.

I had to scabble to catch onto something as the steps beneath my feet fell away. I thought for one awful moment that the whole stairway was going to drop, but I'd forgotten about the ramshackle construction. Even as the lower half crumbled apart, dropping the rest of the soldiers in a heap below, the parts lashed onto the top of the wall still held tight. It was a squeeze that sent bits of the stairs tumbling down each time I turned for the next zig-zag, but I used what was left of the stairs to mount the big wall.

The higher that I got, the more of the world I could see. Beyond the ruins of the big wall and the shantytown built up around it on this side there were open expanses of grassland. Farms dug in with the same military precision as the other fortifications and palisades to supply the troops with fodder. Fields with what looked a bit like horses. Shacks dotted around to store the vital tools and little farmhouses too. Over the horizon I could see smoke rising from more camps or villages. This wasn't just a castle full of soldiers, there was a whole country behind it.

It made me wonder what could have been so scary that they built a wall this gigantic to keep it out before the obvious answer presented itself to me.

Araphel. It all came back to the Voidgod. Everything here came back to him and his war. This ancient wall must have been raised by the Eternals fighting him, to keep him or his forces out. The destruction that had been dealt, ripping this colossal structure apart, that must have been his response to it. The name of the Shattered Bastion made a whole lot more sense now.

Despite the many patches of wooden boards that the soldiers had tossed down, the top level of this little keep latched onto the back of the bastion was uneven and treacherous terrain. The stone was deceptively smooth where it had been melted away. The bubbly bits were easier, with some decent traction. Switching back and forth between the two from step to step was probably what had me slipping the most.

I could see right along the length of the outer wall now I was up here. All the clustered crossbowmen were headed along the walkways towards me and the noise in each of the courtyards told me that the folks down on the ground floor were doing the same.

All along the watchtowers, cries were going up, my location being crowed to everyone in earshot. The walls were not well manned, it would have been impossible to line the upper levels with enough

bodies to cover the full length of the bastion. But between the crow's nest spotters and the mobile clusters of crossbowmen, they had a pretty efficient set up. I'd be sure to tell them how well they were running things when they were done murdering me for being here.

Bolts started to flit in my direction once more, but they flew wide or fell short. I ran for the outer wall as fast as my feet would carry me. By design there shouldn't have been an easy way in or out on that side. All I had to do was hop down and I was home free.

I was not prepared for the chasm.

Whatever melting destruction had taken so much of the bastion had actually been stoppered by it. I revised my opinion on how well it had been built and defended by the ancient Eternals. When you compared it to the destruction beyond the wall, it had held up amazingly well. There was a dead drop on the far side of the wall, plunging about three times as far as the land on the far side. The bastion reached all the way to the bottom. Cracked and smashed but inexplicably still standing in the face of the cataclysm beyond. There were ashes laying down there, but beneath them was the same rough and bubbled stone that marked so much of the bastion. Like all the topsoil had evaporated. Like everything beyond the wall had been sloughed away until only the sundered and pocked bedrock remained. The sight of it took my breath away.

In the abstract, I knew that Araphel was a bad guy, and scary powerful, but seeing just how much destruction he'd dealt to this place put it all in perspective. I was a big guy with a sword and a few tricks up his sleeve. He was a god.

A crossbow bolt grazed across my shoulders, rattling the sea-serpent scales of my armor, and brought me back to the present. I spun to put the shield between me and the crossbowmen, then I took a moment to panic. With everyone else here, I'd have given us even odds of kicking the collective asses of this whole army, but on my own... I might come off a bit egotistical sometimes, that is the danger of admitting how awesome you are, but even I didn't think I could take on everyone in this kingdom and come out on top. Skilled or not, if they surrounded me then eventually they'd chip through my health, even if it cost them a hundred lives to do it.

Another barrage of bolts rattled off my shield. They were close enough to aim properly now. Which meant I needed to move. Charging them was probably my best bet. If I could put them out of commission fast then I only had to fight like... a hundred other guys hand to hand. I could do that.

My confidence might have taken a little shake after peering over the edge into the abyss, but I was still me. I could still win.

I lowered my shield to get a good look at them and realized with a start that they were retreating. They must have worked out I was coming for them next. But then I realized that the cries of alarm had stopped too. Everything had stopped, even the uproar in the lower levels. Some of the soldiers armed for close combat came pouring up out of the keeps on the walls, but they weren't making any effort to get across to this one. In fact, most of them seemed to be sheathing their weapons.

Maybe somebody had finally worked out that I had spent the whole time running away and telling them I didn't want to hurt them. Maybe whoever was the brains of this army had finally shown up to stop the body of it murdering me on reflex. I turned back to look the other way, and understood the real reason for the hush.

At the far side of the keep roof, a woman strode forward. She was clad in the same mish-mash of armor as the other soldiers, but while they had moved in a drudge, she had the lithe elegance I'd come to associate with the Seren. As she closed the distance, she tugged off her helm and tossed it aside, letting a long train of pleated black hair fall back from her sharp featured face.

Maybe in the right circumstances I'd have thought she was beautiful, but right now her skin was drawn tight over the bones beneath as her face contorted in rage. She half-shouted, half-screamed, "You!"

Orphia.



### Chapter 3

I gave her as wide a smile as I dared. "Hi Orphia, how have you been?"

"How have I been since you murdered me in cold blood?" She closed the distance between us, a step at a time. Turning the glaive in her hands in a slow spinning figure of eight as she approached.

"Hey now, be fair. Asher was the one to zap you, and you were acting a bit psycho at the time."

She acted as though I hadn't said anything. That was a bit of a theme with her, only hearing what she wanted to hear. "How have I been? I have been filled with divine purpose. To unite this world against the second revelation. To seek the shards of the Rusted Blade and unite them as I will all the people of Amaranth under a single flag."

"Oh sweet," Maybe we weren't on the best terms, but that didn't mean we couldn't work towards the same goal. Maybe now that she'd realized that she had a divine purpose it had tamped down some of her psycho tendencies. Maybe a pig would fly by any minute now. "Did you find out where the Faun one is?"

She cocked her head to one side. "The only time that I have had to endure in the company of that degenerate race has been when I am spitting them with my blade. As I mean to do with you."

"Uh, rude."

She tossed her glaive back and forth between her hands, making practice cuts that hummed in the air as she paced not towards me now, but in a slow circle, making me do the same or risk having her at my back. "The only pleasure that I shall take in this, other than seeing the look on your stupid face when I gut you, is that the others saw the light and saw you for the treacherous beast you were, abandoning to your fate."

"Oh no, we're still friends. I just came through to scout out the lay of the land before the whole gang arrives." Her frown deepened as I said it, but it wasn't like she wasn't going to find out. "Yeah, they're doing great. Never been better. I'll tell them you were asking for them."

She snarled. "Tell them from your grave."

Leaping forward, she thrust her glaive at me so fast that I almost didn't see her move. It rang off the rim of my shield and got pushed wide as my arm jerked almost involuntarily at the sudden contact. Yet again I had fallen back on instinct instead of my training. Just like Seren kept warning me.

Orphia spun away, her blade sweeping around in an arc, covering her retreat. I wasn't chasing her. Instead I was standing there, being perfectly civil. "I mean, that doesn't really make sense. You know I'm an eternal, the same as you. So you know that even if you do get lucky and stick me with that thing, I'm just going to come back again."

She came at me again, but I could actually see the moment that her Celerity Surge ended and the blur of motion became possible to follow with the naked eye. I caught the first hack with my sword and flicked it away. She hissed as she retreated from me. "Scattered to the winds with no friends to carry you, no equipment to protect you and no hope of finding either ever again."

She made another tentative thrust at me, but after a month, I could recognize a feign and just leaned back a little to keep it from scratching me. Still she ranted on. "I should say that I am doing our treacherous a great service by cutting you down."

The next time she swung for me, I stepped in and caught her glaive just under the blade with the rim of my shield. She wrestled against me for a second, trying to pull it back and having no luck. Wedging it even tighter. She might have been stronger than that skinny body of hers showed, but she wasn't stronger than me. "You haven't learned about shrines yet? I'm just going to pop up back at home if you kill me."

I tugged my shield down and she staggered back. A blue flush creeping up her neck and face as her aggravation mounted. I shrugged, as though we were just talking. "You'll get my armor and sword I guess? That'll be annoying. There aren't that many sea-serpents around."

With a roar, she charged me, slamming the butt of her glaive into the ground to vault up in a graceful arc that landed her right on top of my upturned shield. She hammered the tip of her glaive down into it, then I felt her feet touch down. Her whole weight bearing down on me as she ranted and stabbed down at me uselessly. "Why are you still chattering away? I will end you. Silence you for..."

With a flex of my arm, I flung her off, towards the drop. She had to drop her weapon and scabbled for a grip on the treacherous melted stone or risk sliding right off into the abyss. I scoffed. "For like ten minutes until I get back here."

She dove into a roll, scooping up her glaive as she passed over it and coming up already lunging at me. Lightning coiled around her as she came on, dancing down her arms until it encircled her blade. Even as it hit my shield with a sound like a thunderclap, I could hear her screaming over the top of it. "Die!"

The weapon might have been stopped, but the lightning was not. It rushed into me through the metal conductor of the shield. Racking me with pain as it passed through every inch of me before grounding itself.

Smoke rose off my skin as I groaned, "Sorry, I don't know how to do that yet."

In the distance I could here her soldier buddies cheering her on, and I stopped wondering how she'd ended up here among them. She was a natural born bully, and people like that always found a place, surrounded by others who reveled in it. People who'd stand back and cheer while somebody else got crispy fried, just because they thought that person was on the other team.

That smoke smelled delicious, though. Like bacon. No wonder every monster on this whole planet wanted to eat me. Orphia didn't speak, presumably overcome with how delicious I smelled, so I drew myself back up to my full height with a smirk. "The gloves are off then? We're using all our god powers?"

Her own smile at hurting me faded. The idea that I was holding back seemed to make her even angrier than the way I'd been dodging her so far. That whole thing about a woman scorned being mad as hell? That was her. She was the scorned woman. "What are you going to do, forge weapons at me?"

I let my sphere of influence sweep out over the roof. Everywhere that it had been scarred by the wild destruction that had swept over it was out of my reach, not like the things that were too complex for my simple grasp to manipulate but more like it just wasn't there. Like whatever had been done to it had robbed it of some essential element of realness. There were still streaks of untouched stone in amongst it that felt completely normal, but for the most part, it was like I was standing on nothing. Weird, but not really relevant. I wasn't slipping out of my body to build Orphia a condo, I was going to forge weapons at her.

She rushed in at me again, spinning her glaive in a spiral overhead, trying to hide where the attack would come from. While I was here, outside my body, it was like she was moving through molasses. Going this slow, I could see the moment my shield turned into a flow of liquid. Watched it trace through the air in front of me and reform into a great-sword.

Snapping back to my body, I swung.

To her credit, she didn't let the fear show on her face as the blade's edge came for her. Sweeping through every possible angle of attack in one lethal arc. All she did was drop to the floor and slide beneath it, sacrificing her own attack in exchange for her life. I stomped forward, trying to catch her while she was down, but she was too quick for me, tumbling to her feet just out of reach.

Holding a giant sword up all day just makes your arms sore. It is useless unless it is in motion. I didn't hesitate, heaving with all my strength to reverse my first swipe into an overhead cut that would split her in two before she could find her footing.

It would have got away with it too, if it wasn't for those pesky Eternal powers.

Just as my sword would have hit her, she exploded into a cloud of mist. "Oh come on!"

Sweeping harmlessly through cloud-Orphia, my sword buried itself in the rippled stone below with a crack. Even as I hauled on it, the mist swept over me then coalesced into her shape once more, not on the ground, but up in the air. The metal screeched as I hauled it free and spun, but still I was too slow. She hung in the air for a fraction of a second before gravity brought her and her glaive blade crashing down into me.

[629/890 Health]

Even with my armor, it bit deep into my shoulder. With all her weight and strength in the swing, the eel-scale just wasn't enough. Anyone else would have been split down to the crotch from a hit like that, but on me it caught in my collarbone and stopped.

There was a lot of blood. More blood that I ever wanted to see coming out of me. More blood than I thought I even had in me. My arm on that side started to go cold and useless, but I wasn't letting it give up without a fight.

By force of spite alone I lifted my hand up and grabbed the shaft of the glaive.

Orphia stood over me where I'd fallen from the force of the blow, gloating, "On your knees before me, as befits your kind."

She twisted at the haft of her weapon, wiggling the blade, setting a fresh wash of blood loose down my chest and back, but still not realizing that I had a grip on it.

I don't think she understood what was happening when I swung my great-sword for her one-handed. Like she couldn't understand how I still had the strength to do it. My guts had been hanging out and I'd kept on swinging. This was just a scratch.

But just because she didn't understand something, that didn't mean she was going to fall victim to it. She tried to haul her glaive clear and leap free, only to discover the death-grip I still had on it. That split second of hesitation was all it took for me to hit her.

[98 Damage]

The blow caught her in the hip. The rough-hewn blade was too blunt to cut through her leathers, but the impact was bone-crushing all the same. She folded around it and fell to the ground, screaming defiance at me as she skittered across the slippery stone.

Strength fled my arm now and I had to drop my sword to reach over and pluck the glaive out of my flesh. My skin was thick, but beneath it, I was as soft, pink and juicy as anyone else. I could have done without seeing that today too. I blinked my eyes shut against that sight, just long enough to activate the Primal power of Restoration and close the wound.

[890/890 Health]

The gap in my armor was still there, grey skin showing amidst the still-flesh blood, but the wound was gone. I set the glaive butt on the ground and used it to push myself back to my feet.

Orphia had recovered her feet as well, but she was limping badly and I could hear a little crunchy noise each time she took a step. Guess she never learned how to heal herself. Dumbass. Still, you couldn't say she wasn't trying her hardest. She already had a dagger drawn from somewhere and she was ready to throw down all over again.

I hefted her glaive in my hand and threw it.

She was already leaping to the side before she realized that it wasn't being thrown at her. It flew over the outer wall and down into the great abyss below. "You're done."

Back on her feet and wincing in pain, she started inching towards me. "This is not over until you lay dead at my feet."

"You've got no weapon. You've got no healing." I held out my hand to my side and with one little pulse of the Pillar of Artifice I remade my sword in my hand from where it lay on the ground. "You're done, Orphia. Don't make me kill you again."

Her shoulders shook, and for one awful moment I thought that she was crying. Screaming raving murderous Orphia was par for the course, but I had no idea how I would deal with a psycho who was also a crying girl. Lucky for me, she was laughing instead. Wild eyed and drooling a little as she cackled. Great look for her.

I was just starting to wonder what the hell she was laughing at when I heard the voice behind me say, "Nay, you are the one whose journey has come to its end, Moonstruck Beast."

Turning my back to Orphia seemed like a good recipe for a kidney stabbing, but I had to see who was there. I fully expected it to be an overconfident soldier boy, hoping to get some psycho smooches for standing up to the dude who'd kicked his boss's ass, but that wasn't it.

The man was middle aged, with a full beard framing a creased face, and long hair parted right down the middle, all shiny and golden blonde to match his gold filigreed armor. He looked completely human apart from the eyes, which blazed with a golden light. Another Eternal. Another Solar Eternal. Another Solar Eternal on Orphia's side. This day was going great so far.

One last time, I sheathed my sword and lifted up my now empty hands. "Listen buddy, I'm not here to fight anyone. We're all on the same side here."

He did not approach, but he drew his own sword from where it hung on his belt. The moment he touched it, I felt like I couldn't take my eyes away from it, and when the shimmering silver of the sword was fully drawn it was almost hypnotic. I could feel it drawing me in. I wanted it. I wanted to hold it. Wanted to own it. Wanted it to run my right through if that was the only way to get close to it. That last thought was weird enough to shake me out of whatever trance the sword was putting me into, but I could still feel a tug towards it, like magnetism.

Down by the golden hilt, there was one jagged section of the blade a completely different color. Dull and almost brown with age. That was what was drawing me in now. Not the pretty part that he flourished with obvious skill, but the ugly bit down at the root. The shard of the rusted blade that I'd come here looking for. I almost didn't notice when he spoke again. "Is that truly what you believe?"

I'd been so lost in my new fixation that I had to backtrack through the conversation in my head to catch myself back up to speed. On the same side. Do I believe that? Right. Okay. "Nobody wants the Voidgod to win, right?"

He stalked closer to me, looming large in my vision despite our height difference. Power seemed to radiate off him, an aura of danger and power. He hadn't arrived with the rest of us, which meant that he was one of the Eternals that had already been here for years or... centuries. How powerful could all of that time have made a man? "There are some who would say that the return of the Adversary would be entirely to the advantage of those who wish to spread dissent and chaos in the name of the pantheon of bedlam."

"Okay, but that isn't me." I wagged my empty hands in the air once more, just to make sure he could see how non-threatening I was. "I'm just trying to do the right thing, stop the bad guy, I'm not about spreading chaos or whatever."

"Master, do not heed his lies. Strike him down!" Orphia cried out from right behind me and I nearly crapped myself. I had completely forgotten about her and her little knife in the combined presence of a shard and some sort of shiny golden demigod.

"Silence, child." The gold guy spoke softly to her, commanding, but not overbearing. The voice of a man used to being obeyed. He lost all that softness when he turned his attention back to me.

"Whatever you may believe of yourself, Chagnar, it is in your nature to spread chaos. It is what you are. Just as it is in our nature to stop you."

When he said that last bit, I was pretty sure the sword in his hand glinted menacingly.

My heel caught on a ridge in the melted roof and I noticed that I was backing away from him. I don't respond well to fear. The old fight or flight thing? I don't have wings. The old rumble was back in my voice when I replied. "And nobody ever did the right thing when it didn't come natural to them? Nobody ever thought about doing something bad and then didn't?"

He sprang forward so fast he blurred. The tip of his shiny sword hovering, perfectly controlled, just an inch from my neck. His bushy eyebrows drew down as he growled back. "You wish to bandy words with me, to speak of philosophy when the blood of my kinsmen is upon your hands?"

If he thought I was going to back off just because I had a sword to my throat, he didn't know me. "Your guys didn't give me much choice. From the minute I got here everybody has been trying to stab me."

"Because you're a monster." Orphia sniped from the sidelines.

I jabbed a finger at her face. "The man told you to shut up, Stabarella!"

His whiskers flicked and I thought he might just maybe have had a smile on his face for a moment. "Though I do not care for his insolent tone, this Chagnar has the right of it, Orphia. Remain silent while your betters speak."

"Whoa! Hey now, I'm not better than anybody." Sometimes my mouth just goes on making noises whether I want to shut the hell up or not. "I mean, I'm better than her because she is a racist psycho, but I'm not like... inherently better than her."

This close I could see every line on his face. Eternals didn't age, so he'd been looking like this for as long as he'd been walking the world. If I hadn't spent a month trying to decipher the facial expressions of an ice queen Alvaren, then I probably wouldn't be able to read a single one of the expressions that passed over that stoic mask of his. As it was, when his eyebrows twitched up, I knew that he was surprised. "She is weak and we are strong. In a world of untold savagery, might is the only law."

I disagreed with all of that and my gut instinct was to tell him just how completely he was wrong, but on the other hand, he was the superpowered dude pointing a magic sword at me, so quibbling over this stuff didn't seem like my best bet for getting through the conversation with all my limbs attached. Maybe I'm smarter than I look? "So we're both strong. Does that mean we can talk, like adults, instead of waving our big swords around?"

He did not lower his sword. "You say to me that my bannermen struck at you from the moment of your discovery. Tell me how you came to be within the impregnable fortress of the Shattered Bastion."

"Oh," I shrugged. "I used the Waystone."

The eyebrows twitched again, like agitated little caterpillars. Surprise. Again. "The Waystones have not functioned since Talon went into decline, and you mean to tell me that some fresh-made Eternal has learned the secret of their use?"

"Well, yeah." He stared at me in disbelief. "Not me, obviously, but my buddy Asher worked it out. He's a real wiz at all that wizard stuff."

He let the sword ease down slowly to his side, and from the periphery of my vision I could see Orphia's face drop at the same time. Going from malicious delight when she thought I was going to die, to dismay and finally disgust when he slipped the blade back into its scabbard and that weird pull that it had on me faded away. "Then Orphia spoke truly, you travel with companions of the Solar Court?"

Okay, we were talking. Nobody was getting chopped up. This was good. This was what I wanted. Sure I still felt like I was walking a tightrope, but at least I was walking it in the right direction now? "They're not here with me now, but yeah."

He leaned in a little closer. "And they will vouch for your good conduct?"

"Asher will for sure." I grinned. "Maybe not Mercy, that kind of depends what kind of mood she's in."

He returned my smile with a small and tentative one of his own. Like he wasn't used to twisting his mouth that way. "Then I entreat you to send for them at once."

Orphia looked like she was about to puke. She darted forward, squealing, "Leofric! Those were the traitors who..."

He backhanded her so casually it took me a moment to spot what had happened. That big golden gauntlet of his cracked across her jaw and launched her across the rooftop to land in a heap. She did not spring up again the way she had when I knocked her down. She lay there. Beaten.

My hand was on the hilt of my sword before I told it to move and I shifted to put myself between the two of them. "Hey man, that is not cool."

"She is your enemy, even if you are not mine." His brows drew back down. "This creature would see you dead. She attempted to slay you but a moment ago. What madness makes you seek to defend her?"

I was kind of wondering that myself, what could be so important that I'd get in between Orphia and the righteous beatdown she deserved. Even as my brain tried to work it through, my mouth was already telling Leofric what my gut knew. "She's your girl, yeah? She's on your team? You can't treat your people that way."

He scoffed. "And so the chaos in your blood comes to the fore. It is the natural order that the strong should rule over the weak, and you would contest it?"

My hand was still up on the hilt of my great-sword where it poked up over my shoulder and my knuckles were turning white. "If that means not slapping people around for no damn reason then yes, I'd contest it."

"She was disobedient. I told her to be silent and thrice she spoke. She knows the law of this land. She knew when she swore her fealty to me that I would not suffer insubordination." He said it like it was so obvious I was an idiot for not getting it.

Maybe I was an idiot, but I still needed to make something clear. "If we're going to be working together, and you try that with Asher or Mercy... then I'll... I won't even have to do anything if you try that with Mercy. There wouldn't be enough of you left for me to hit."

"It strikes me that you still misunderstand your part in all this. We are not equals. I do not seek allies among the Eternals who walk Amaranth, I seek lords to set above the common man, that you might rule as the gods intended." He reached up and clapped his hands on my shoulders. "If you mean to serve the cause and wage war on the Adversary and all his servants, then I shall welcome you with open arms, but if you mean to subvert my great design in word or in deed then you are my enemy."

Oh man. He was just as nutty as Orphia, but he had the power to back it up. I needed to grab his sword and get the hell out of here.

He didn't even give me a chance to answer before he bellowed, pushing me down. "Kneel before me, reject the heresy of the Lunar court and swear fealty upon this sacred relic. The Lucis; symbol of my office, symbol of my divine right to dominion and the mark of my righteousness."

Both sword and scabbard were hauled out of his belt and he held it out level with my face. All I had to do was reach up and grab it.

After that I just had to escape from the crazy powerful Eternal right in front of me, and all his minions, and get out of the castle that I was in the middle of that was full of his soldiers, and then the whole kingdom that he'd laid claim to beyond that, and then... Okay I really needed a better plan than grab and run.

I reached up very carefully and laid my hands on the scabbard. I could feel the power of the shard thrumming inside it. Pulsing just out of reach. Even through the scabbard and my gloves, I could feel it reaching out to me, like it wanted to be with me. Like the pull I was feeling went both ways.

Opening my mouth, I did not have a clue what was going to come tumbling out. Luck saved me from whatever nonsense I was about to spout as suddenly, Leofric's head snapped around. A cry was going up from further along the wall, and the soft sound of two little thunderclaps rolled over us, just like when I'd arrived through the Waystone.

The whole gang was here.