

Chapter 7

What was left of the night dragged on and I made a less than graceful dismount of my worm-corpse-bed when some smaller critters came up from beneath the ash and started chowing down on it. I guess that there wasn't a lot of food on the go in a desolate wasteland devoid of all life. Who'd have thought?

I got back to a safe distance and watched the show, fully expecting another worm to pop out and treat me as an appetizer for the banquet, but no matter how ready I was to rumble, they weren't. Even when the whole ash desert beneath the Dhole carcass was writhing and heaving with competing carrion eaters, not one of them even looked my way. Not that they could look, since they didn't have eyes.

Don't get me wrong, I was ready for a fight, after getting my brain tickled by Araphel, I was ready to fight just about anyone, but I didn't feel the need to slap the crap out of some worms that were just trying to get some dinner. As long as that dinner wasn't me. Over the course of what felt like an hour, they noisily and messily devoured the Dhole while I watched and when the ash finally stopped heaving, all that was left was a damp patch in the ash. That had filled up some more time at least. Kind of like watching a nature documentary, but squishier.

Then it was back to standing around, waiting for the sun to glow on one of the horizons so I could get going again.

There was barely even the first hint of light when I took off running. All of yesterday's halfhearted attempts at stealth were forgotten in my joy. I didn't care that I was slipping and sliding over the dunes. I finally had something to do. I was free to run, to move, to live.

Beneath me, I caught hints and glimmers of Dholes and Khorkhoi of all sizes, all diving deeper as I passed. Maybe they really were smarter than I might have expected, or maybe I was still crusted with Dhole blood and that distinct aroma was warding them off.

As the day broke fully and the sun started to creep up into the sky, I was startled to find that there was stone beneath me again. The dull numb null of the stuff that the Voidgod's powers had washed over, but real workable stone below that. Ridges and rises. A whole topography buried beneath the ash and destruction. Hints and clues about the world that had been before Araphel got his claws into it. Maybe this had been a mountain, maybe it had just gotten lucky and whatever had been unleashed on this land had bounded over this patch by luck.

It wasn't until later as I came upon ridge after ridge that a picture started to form. They were the outer edges of a crater, but a crater caused not by one big bang, but by an explosion that kept happening, over and over and over. Spreading out further and further with each repetition. I was heading towards the epicenter. That was where Leofric had sent me. To the heart of all this destruction.

The ridges came closer and closer together the nearer I got to that center, bucking higher and higher beneath the ash until some broke the surface. Null stone that I couldn't touch with Artifice at first, but then more and more pronounced peaks and spikes with cores of rock that still felt alive and workable to

my senses. Past midday, the ash began to give away beneath my feet to solid feeling stone that my Artifice couldn't sense. What ash there was seemed to be there courtesy of the wind instead of being resident. There was still plenty of it stacked up against the foot of the stone spurs I now found myself passing between, but it wasn't everywhere.

At some point, the flat of the desert gave way to an uphill climb, gentle at first, then growing steeper, and soon the circular ridges that had been thrown up became real impediments to progress, and I had to go wandering along them to find the places where they had been crumbled, or where they were slung low enough that I could make the jump over them.

It was only when I had to use Potency Surge to leap over a particularly high one that I finally noticed that I wasn't alone any more. I landed heavily with a stumble in what looked like a vegetable patch cultivated in the ashy soil that had gathered behind the high ridge and there was a Faun just standing there, staring back at me. From the armor and the spears, I was guessing that she wasn't a farmer. From the stricken look on her face, I was guessing that she hadn't expected me to jump over that wall in one bound.

"Uh. Hi."

To her credit, the surprise didn't stop her long, she was already hefting that spear up to take her shot before the words were even out my mouth and I started having flashbacks to my arrival at the fort on the other side of the ash.

"No, no, no. Don't javelin me." I held my empty hands right up in the air. "Don't throw. I'm here to talk. I'm just here to talk."

"What kind of trick is this?" There was a frantic edge to her bass voice, but at least she wasn't impaling me. "Why do you wear our skin? Why do you speak our tongue?"

"No trick! This is my own skin. But I'm not a Faun. I'm an Eternal." I started talking even faster to get through the rest before she had time to throw anything. "And I'm telling you that now because I don't want you to think I'm trying to lie about that in any way. I'm being honest. So please don't shoot at me."

The flinty tip of the spear was still pointed at me, her arm still cocked back, missile ready to launch. There was a growl in her voice that brought all the hairs on the back of my neck to attention. "You come from the camp of the adversary."

"Oh no. That's just where I landed." I took a half step forward before I realized my mistake and threw my arms right back up again. I really did not want to have to fight Faun. "I'm not on that gold-plated prick's side. I swear."

Her eyes narrowed. The hump of her nose wrinkling. "You are one of his creatures."

"I'm really not." Was this paranoia or did Leo actually have creatures? I really hoped he didn't have creatures. Creatures and a whole army and a pair of eternals felt like a lot of work, even for me.

"He has carved you into the shape of the Firstborn, but you are not." Her dark lips curled back from teeth that she had sharpened to points. That looked cool as hell. She had the body that Seren's mind would

have fit into perfectly. Her horns looked like they'd been filed sharper too. Everything about her honed for wicked violence. I was kind of into it?

I dragged my gaze back to her eyes. The pupils were like a goat's, a sideways figure of eight. This was the first time I was seeing a Faun in real life with all the details. It was weirdly exciting. Like meeting your long lost family and making contact with an alien species all rolled up in one. If your long lost alien cousin was a buff warrior lady that you wanted to step on you. "I already told you, I'm an Eternal, not a Faun."

"Like him."

"No, not like him. I'm a Lunar Eternal." I pointed to my face, then jerked my hand back up before she could throw. "Check the eyes. Moonlight, right?"

She took a cautious step forward to examine me. Those golden eyes darting up and down, side to side. Taking in every inch of me. Shame I was covered in bug guts really. "Another trick."

"Okay, here's the deal. Nothing I say is going to convince you I'm not a secret monster, right?" Her eyes narrowed, but she nodded along with me. "So why don't you take me to somebody who can tell for sure? You've got to have a wizard or something lying around. Right?"

She slowly eased her spear down from where she had been holding it steady above her head, ready to launch, all of this time. Her knuckles were still white where she gripped it. "Koschei would know for sure."

I lowered my hands too, just as slowly. "Great, let's go see Koschei."

She backed away from me slowly, letting me step out of the vegetable patch and onto the ragged stone once again. I gestured to her. "Uh, lead on."

Once more, that voice of hers made the hair all over my body stand on end. "When Koschei declares you an abomination, I shall be there to spit you."

I grinned at her. "And when he says I'm his new best friend, I shall be very polite to you, because hopefully we'll be friends too."

She spat into the ash pile by my feet.

"Am I meant to spit back, is this a Faun greeting thing?"

"No." She didn't seem amused. Oh well. I can't win everyone over with my sparkling personality. I had to drown Seren twice and knock her out once before she was my girlfriend. Maybe if I was aiming for a casual friendship with this Faun lady I'd only need to do a little light maiming.

She jerked her head away from my admiring stare, her hair was braided back with beads of ivory dotting each thread, spaced out so that they didn't bump together and make a noise. She had to jerk her head again before I worked out she wasn't just waving her hair around, she was gesturing for me to walk ahead of her.

“Alright, enjoy the view.” I put an extra wiggle in my hips as I walked away. Asher would have sighed. Seren would have rolled her eyes. Mercy would have shot me in the butt-cheek. This Faun said nothing at all. Not a peep. It was a bit disappointing.

We followed around the curve of the next raised crest just a short distance until she stopped behind me. “In.”

I looked at the barren wall of stone beside me. “Uh? How?”

She spat again. “You are not Chagnar.”

“Already covered that.”

With a little huff of disdain she launched herself past me, running sideways up the wall. If Faun had anti-gravity powers all this time, I was genuinely mad that nobody had told me about them. She got to the crest of the stone and spun on her heel to look back down at me. I was tall, apparently tall for even Faun, but she was looking down on me like I was an ant from up on that wall.

I moved closer in to the wall of ruined stone, studying it carefully with my eyes, since my other senses told me nothing, but it was only when I was almost beside it and looking along that I saw the footholds she’d used. Clotted with ash. Barely wide enough to fit a fingertip, let alone a foot. I couldn’t tell if they’d been carved in and then obscured, or if this was just the formation of the bristling upshot stone and she could somehow recognize it without a second glance. Maybe she was just so used to travelling this terrain that it was natural to her.

It certainly wasn’t natural to me, but that didn’t mean I was giving up without even trying. Taking a deep breath, I broke into a run, angling my broad body out from the wall so that my feet would hit it instead of my shoulders. I made a little jump once I was up to speed and my foot skidded down the stone until it jarred for just a moment against a ledge before slipping off. It was enough. I pushed off from there, slamming my next foot down even higher, scraping over flat stone until my heel caught on another protruding edge then I was off again.

I almost made it. Well no, I didn’t I made it about a quarter of the way up before my top heavy body veered out, my legs pumped in the open air for one moment, then gravity caught up to me and I ate dirt.

The Faun on top of the wall toppled over too. Falling back out of sight beyond the ridge for just long enough for me to think she’d been attacked before her booming laughter rolled down over me. Great. The roars of laughter turned to wheezing and gasping, then back to a fresh set of whoops when she dragged herself back up to the ridge and saw me clambering to my feet.

She was struggling for breath by the time I was trying to line up for another run at it. Wheezing out, “I am an Eternal, warrior of the gods and... I...” She couldn’t even finish her mocking for laughing so hard. She just slapped one of her hands down on the ridge and cackled.

“Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up.”

This time I didn't hesitate, I didn't second guess or worry about brushing my shoulder or my horns on the wall. It wasn't like they could make things go worse than the first time around. I really thought that I was going to make it, right up until the moment that my foot came down on a smooth patch of wall and started to fall. I twisted out, away from the wall, so I'd at least have a chance of landing on my feet, but before I'd dropped an inch, I jerked to a halt.

The lady Faun had a grip on my horns, down by the base where they met my skull, and she was hauling with all her strength. It wasn't going to be enough. I was a big guy. I appreciated the effort, but it wasn't going to work. "Just drop me."

"We do not have all day."

I dangled there like a weird puppet, trying to dig my heels into the wall and get some traction, but it didn't seem to be helping much. "I'm too heavy. Just drop me."

Another hand latched onto my horns, then another, and another. A guttural voice growled out. "We do not lift alone."

They lifted me up over the wall by my head, spinning me around and hauling me in, and a few things became apparent in quick succession. The first was that Faun in general seemed to be a lot stealthier than me. There was a full patrol's worth of spear toting watchers arrayed around the concentric rings of the crater. The second was that while I was big for a Faun, I certainly was not the biggest Faun around. One of the big fellas who had a hold on my horns made me look like the before picture in a weight lifting supplement advert. The guy that got sand kicked in his face by the bully.

I eyed them all, massive and bristling with weaponry, and finally had some idea of why Leo's little posse was so scared of these guys. "Uh, thanks."

The five gathered Faun looked around at each other and shrugged together. A Mexican wave of indifference. One of the other women was looking me up and down in a way that I've got to describe as predatory. She was bigger than me too, her horns curving up to points above her head and making her look even taller. She nudged the first lady Faun with her elbow. "Want help?"

The first lady Faun, who'd nearly busted a gut laughing at me, glanced at me and snorted. "Do not need it."

More shrugging, then without a backwards glance, they all spread out back to their posts, dark hair, grey skin and dusty armor blending with the spikes and whorls of the stone all about us. Even after watching them take up their positions again, I struggled to pick them out after I'd glanced away. They could teach Mercy a thing or two about sneaking.

The next time we came to ring grown too high, Lady Faun gave me a disdainful look. "This time?"

I did my best not to pout as I gave her a nod. She mountain goat-ed her way up the invisible footholds and I Surged my Potency again, leaping clean over it and landing in another vegetable patch with a squelch. So much for my grand entrance.

Those muddy patches were everywhere now that I looked back down over the concentric plateaus. Everywhere enough ash and dirt had been heaped up. The Faun were living here, making a home for themselves in this most inhospitable place, and that meant growing crops. It meant guarding it against invasion. I thought I was going to find some campsite in the middle of the ash desert and instead it seemed like I was strolling into the Faun version of a town.

Getting closer to the apex of all the ancient explosions that made this place, more and more of the natural surroundings leapt up in the lee of the rocky outcroppings. Here and there I could see trees growing up out of still living soil, their branches laden with woven baskets and drying Khorkhoi remains. There were Faun here too, hulking like me, but not in the way that the Lady Faun was. She was like a stallion rearing up for battle while the other Faun I saw were more like pack horses, trudging along. We were all noble animals in our own way, and I'm sure any one of us could have given a human a good kicking, but there was still a world of difference between the folks I'd seen out manning the battlements and the normal people just getting on with their lives.

Everywhere I went in this world, I kept finding them. People just trying to live their lives without powers or training or magic or destiny giving them what they needed to stand up for themselves against Amaranth. I didn't know if this place had always been so violent and dangerous or if that was all Araphel's doing, but I did know that he wasn't trying to make it better. If he came back, it would be like this place all over again, explosions on top of explosions and all these people that had nothing to do with anything were the ones who'd catch it.

"Are you remembering all that you see, spy?"

I jerked around to find those pointy teeth of my guide bared at me. "Not a spy. Really not a spy. I've just... I've never met Faun before. This is all exciting stuff for me, seeing how you live."

"This is not how we live." She spat again. "This is how we survive. This is what we are brought down to."

Wow, I'd just stamped right on a sore subject there. "I heard somebody say that the land on the other side of the wall used to belong to you?"

Her voice was getting louder now. Her tone going from the grim declarations and mockery she'd been sharing with me so far into something else. Like she was reciting an old story that she knew word for word. "All Amaranth was our hunting ground. Now we are driven from fertile lands to this... dust."

An age-bent old woman ambled by us with a basket of crops on her back, shaking her horned head from side to side. "Shame. Shame."

Like a rumble it echoed out from the mouths of all the Faun in earshot. "Shame. Shame. Shame."

She was roaring as we walked through the town. Bellowing at the top of her lungs, and every head turned to face us. Every mouth hung open to join the chant. "This world was made for us, then came the wrym with their fire, then came the pale ones with their chains, the underfolk and their living dark. Eternals and humans. Enemies all. Every one of them took and took until we had nothing but these last scraps of dust."

I could feel their misery pulsing against my skin. Shaking the stone beneath our feet. "Shame. Shame. Shame."

"We are the firstborn. Greatest of hunters. Greatest of warriors." Her voice faltered to a droning whisper. "And what we did not offer in our kindness they stole in their treachery."

"Shame."

The whole settlement had fallen silent. We were near to the epicenter now, of that I had no doubt. Skins had been strung up over the branches of the more plentiful trees here, stretched over bones to make something like tents or lean-to shelters. Not for the folks to sleep under, I had no idea where the people here slept, but to protect the few crafts that were being undertaken from the worst of the elements. There were no cooking fires that I could see, though in some places a puff of smoke might escape from out one of the haphazard tents.

If we were anywhere else, I would have built them houses. I would have made this place into somewhere safe for them to live without fear of wind whipping through with a storm of ash. But here, so close to whatever catastrophe had struck the only thing that my Artifice could touch was what they had brought here with them. Even the trees felt dead to my Lifesense.

I cleared my throat and blathered through the awkward silence. "Thanks for the history lesson."

"There are no others who will speak our truth." She wouldn't even look me in the eye as she said it. "Even when our truth is shame, we keep it."

"You don't have anything to be ashamed of."

"So say our cowards. The ones who would have us forget what we were. What we are." When she turned back to me those golden eyes burned as bright as any Eternal's. Filled with passion and rage. "The brave have the courage to face the truth. We are meant for more than this. We are due more than this."

"You are." I held up my empty hands again, just giving her a little reminder that I was not in any way fighting her. "You deserve better."

She was still staring at me with the same deranged intensity. "Amaranth belongs to the Faun."

"No arguments here."

She looked me up and down with contempt once more. "You would say anything to save your own hide."

"My hide is fine either way. There's nothing you or anybody else can do to me that's going to stick. That's what the whole Eternal part of the name is about. Everlasting." I shrugged and lowered my hands. Force of habit was a hell of a thing, and I'd spent one lifetime trying not to die. It was kind of difficult to let go of that. "I think you're right. It is messed up that you have to live out here in ash-ville when there are plenty of much nicer places that you could be hanging out."

Her lips slowly edged back down over her teeth. "Truly?"

“Yeah, I mean, the other side of that wall had a lot of nice green spaces where you could hunt things that aren’t worms, and if you go far enough past Leo’s little cargo-cult you’ll get to even more empty spaces. You don’t have to stay here, you know that right?”

“You would have us abandon this place?” The hump of her nose wrinkled up in an instant. Her hand flung up to the spear slung over her shoulder. “Leave it untended so that our enemies can lay claim to it?”

I put my hands over my eyes and groaned. I was so tired of everyone looking for an excuse to stab me. “Can I just talk to Koschei please?”

Silence still filled up the village after the shame chanting, but when I said that name, that silence took on a whole new aspect. Oppressive.

It broke with a roar. “Who seeks Koschei?”

The biggest Faun I’d ever seen was standing at the top of the next, final crest. He carried an axe in each hand that could have felled a tree with one swing. He was dressed up in the shiniest armor I’d seen all day. Not just pretty, but better crafted than any other Faun’s too. This guy was clearly the boss.

“Hi, yes. Me. Maulkin. I’m the one who seeks Koschei... Is that you?”

He burst out laughing. Literally doubling over. Dropping his axes and slapping his knees. “He thinks I am Koschei?!”

Even the grumpiest of all Faun standing beside me with her hand on her spear couldn’t hold back a chortle. I sighed.

Another giant of a Faun came lumbering into sight on the ridge, a hammer with a head as big as my whole torso balanced on one shoulder and his other hand slapping the axe-guy on the back as he roared with the same laughter. “I am Koschei!”

The old woman with the crops called over her shoulder. “I’m Koschei.”

“You’re hilarious.” It was my turn to scowl, apparently. “That’s what you are.”

Another lady-Faun lurched up over the crest cackling so hard she could barely wheeze out, “Do not listen to them. I’m Koschei!”

I turned back to the woman that had led me this far. “So is Koschei actually a real person or was this all just the set up for a really unfunny skit?”

The two absolutely gigantic Faun up on the crest stumbled apart and I fully expected to see yet another beast of a Faun pop up between them to declare himself, but instead it was a Dvergar.

He came up to the shins of the titans around him, was dressed in furs and scraps that wouldn’t have looked out of place on a beggar and whatever beard he’d had was shaved clean away, along with his eyebrows and hair. But what he did have, was a pair of eyes shining moonlight down at me. Oh.

“Come up, little moon runt. Best we get to speaking.”

