

Chapter 12

There was no parade when I got back to the Bastion. There wasn't even a rope.

There had been no worm attack on my way back, and I was profoundly disappointed, because I'd been looking forward to seeing if my new level of Artifice could find something useful in the giant monster corpse that I could use. I supposed that I might even have been able to refine the teeth into some patches for my armor, since it was in a pretty bad state. Eel-skin sloughing off to leave my skin exposed underneath.

Either they hadn't expected me to come back so quickly, or they hadn't expected me to come back at all. I shouted for a little bit, but the wall was high enough that I wasn't sure anyone up there would actually be able to hear me. Which was just great. Or maybe they'd turned on Asher and Mercy the second I was out of sight and now they planned to leave me out here to be worm food. Also a distinct possibility.

Regardless of what I was going to find on the other side of that wall, I still needed to get onto the other side of that wall, so I made a little spike on the pommel of my sword, wedged Koschei's head on it, then started to climb the desolate stone.

Pocked and scarred by the explosion that had ruined this place, I found it easier than I'd expected to find hand and foot holds, and the fact that Faun don't get tired really helped out with the whole climbing thing. I mean, I wasn't going to be rocking up any mountains any time soon, but here on this big flat wall peppered with holes big enough to hook my hands in, it was pretty manageable. I wasn't even out of breath, which was lucky because I was still in the middle of an in depth conversation with Koschei about my relationship problems. "...I don't even know if she even likes me? You know? I beat her in a fight, then threatened to kill her, then saved her life, and then I gave her some swords, and that is like some ceremonial thing with the Alvaren I guess? Like, the king gives his knights a sword or something? So maybe she just thinks I'm her duty?"

"I don't know man, that sounds like a weird situation."

Surging my Potency, I leapt up the wall in great bounds. Hammering my hands into the walls and making new cracks to pry into where there weren't already hand-holds. "I know, right? I mean she was the one who invited me to... take it to the next level or whatever, but did she actually want to, or was it just what she thought she had to do? Like... am I her job?"

"No wonder this is messing with your head, brother." Koschei nodded along involuntarily with my movements. "Sounds like you need to sit down and have a talk with her about your feelings."

I turned around and yelled in his face. "You shut the hell up severed head. I am a man, damnit! I will never willingly sit down and talk about my feelings. Never!"

"I'm just saying that maybe if you told her that you were worried about all this, you might be able to sort it out." The next stretch of wall was thoroughly riddled with holes, so when the potency surge faded, it wasn't so difficult to slip back into the old climbing rhythm again. I was still only about a quarter of the

way up the wall after that surge. It was mid morning by the time that I got to the foot of the Bastion but this climb might take up the rest of the day.

“But what if she turns around and I’m right, and she’s only banging me out of duty. That would suck.”

Koschei’s mouth flapped open and shut now, as rigor mortis faded. “Plus, you wouldn’t be able to grab any more elf ass.”

“And that would be terrible!” I yelped. “Do you have any idea how hot she is?”

“Hey man, you don’t have to tell me, I might not have a body, but I’ve still got eyes, you know?”

I took a hand away from the wall to grab hold of his face. “You keep your eyes to yourself Koschei. That’s my girl.”

Between the pinch of my fingers, his mouth opened. “Or maybe she isn’t. Maybe she’s just doing booty duty.”

I turned my attention back to the wall. The higher I got, the rarer the fingerholds were and the more I was having to launch myself up to grab onto them. For a while I ended up moving sideways instead of up, just searching for something I could use.

With a sigh I looked back to Koschei. “Plus, she’s still got that whole Alvaren supremacy thing going on. I am not a big fan of that. She thinks that she’s better than everyone else in the world, just because she’s got those pointy ears. I’ve tried talking to her about it, and sometimes I think she gets it, but then the next time I look around she’s got that look on her face, like the dvergar are worms or something.”

“Oh yeah man, that is nasty.” His head bobbed forward until the mouth was right behind my ear. “You should probably break up with her.”

I turned to look him in the eye. “Are you just saying that because you want to date her?”

“Hey man, I’m just a severed head. What am I going to do with her?”

That was a fair point. I turned my attention back to the task at hand for now. The handholds were getting smaller and smaller, until sometimes I was supporting my full weight with just my fingers hooked into a tiny gap. It was a good thing my Potency was so high. If you’d asked Asher to climb this thing he would not have made it past... well.... The ash desert, probably.

Potency surge had ticked back into action, so I took advantage launching myself up onto the bare expanse of stone above me and hammering in my fists. For as long as the surge lasted, I moved up in leaps and bounds, but the moment that it faltered I was going to be stuck unless I got past this smooth bit.

With one final grunt of effort as the surge died, I launched myself like a crossbow bolt up the length of the wall. Air whistling in my ears. Then I saw it. The level of the ground on the other side, where an industrious tree root had pushed its way between the pale stone to dangle before my eyes. I grabbed onto it with both hands and hung out there while I worked out my next move. I glanced back to see

Koschei staring. Then I groaned. “Oh gods, I’m actually going to have to talk to her about all this. Like a mature adult or something.”

“Better you than me man.” His head lolled from side to side, mockingly as I swung from the root. “If you try to break up with her, you’re probably going to end up my height.”

“I hadn’t even thought about that. What if she goes stabby crazy on me?”

“Wouldn’t be the first time.” Koschei pointed out. All too accurately.

I let myself hang limp from the root for a second, then I started to pull myself up again. There was a patch of brickwork up above me. Recent repairs that were missing the pockmarked holes I was used to, but that made up for it with gaps where mortar was meant to have been put in. They’d laid it from the other side, and never had any way to check how it looked out here. “Oh man, it would really suck if she murdered me.”

I cleared the bricks in no time at all, even as Koschei said. “You’d get better.”

“I mean like...” I waved a hand back and forth as I searched for another handhold. “Emotionally.”

Koschei lolled to the side. “Oh yeah, that would sting.”

“Who the hell are you talking to?” Mercy was peering down at me over the top of the wall.

I was so happy to see her I nearly lost my grip. “Mercy!”

She shouted back. “Maulkin!”

Leaning back and peering I could see her head and shoulders poking out over the battlements. She seemed to be alone. “Asher?”

She shrugged. “Nope.”

My fingers started to slip, and I had to press myself back against the wall rapidly. “Rope?”

“Oh, yeah. One sec.”

The second passed, along with a good few more. “Any day now.”

“I’m tying it to something so your fat ass doesn’t pull me off the wall, shut up.”

The rope dropped down and the coil of it whacked against me, still unrolling as it went on its merry way down the wall. I really should not have looked down. My hands were shaky when I grabbed a hold and gave it a tug to make sure it would take my weight. Thankfully, it did. From there it was as simple as going hand over hand up the rest of the distance, strolling up the side of the Bastion like it was a day in the park. I even had enough breath to banter properly again. “Aww, even after all this time you’re still thinking about my ass.”

Mercy was out of sight, but I could hear her when she made a little snort. “Thinking about cutting this rope and dropping you on your ass.”

“Wouldn’t want to damage my good side.”

“At least we both agree that face is a mess.”

My mess had just popped up over the side of the wall as she said it, and I could see that she was smiling. Aww, she really did miss me. There was nobody else around. A few of the guards were scattered further along, but they seemed to be keeping their distance. Given what I’d done to them when I first arrived, I couldn’t really fault them. Although I wasn’t sure why they’d be hiding from Mercy, since she was on their team. Or at least wearing their team colours in her eyes.

I gave her a smile in return, and her expression slipped back to its usual snarky smirk. Like it was more comfortable for her than letting me see her genuinely happy. I’d never ask her about her last life, since she seemed so intent on avoiding the subject, but I wondered sometimes what had happened to make her this way. I shook the thought out of my head and stretched my arms out. Even if they didn’t get tired, it still wasn’t exactly comfortable climbing all that time. “Did I miss any excitement?”

She rolled her eyes. “Not unless you think watching some smug prick stroking his own ego non-stop for days at a time is exciting.”

“Asher isn’t all bad.”

She coughed instead of laughing. “Leo. He’s a real piece of work. Just like you said.”

“Did he give you the whole speech about not being equals. He’s king and you can be his underlings, all that real charming stuff?”

Her eyes flitted to the guards. Checking they were out of earshot before she dunked on their boss too hard. “I think you got the abridged version. Our one wasn’t that straightforward, and it lasted for... actually he might still be in the middle of it. I got bored and snuck out to check for you.”

“Because you missed me so bad.” I put an arm around her shoulders.

She shrugged it off. “Even you are better than listening to another minute of ‘oh I’ve lived a billion years so you should all think that I’m terribly interesting.’ I swear I’ve never met anyone so in love with themselves.”

Looking out across the verdant green land beyond the Bastion, it was hard not to compare it to how the Faun had been living, scraping in the dust desperately trying to stay alive. “So you get that he’s the bad guy now, yeah?”

“I never thought he wasn’t.” Mercy shrugged. “I just hoped we might be able to... use him I guess.”

I grinned down at her. “Well, mission accomplished, he’s going to be our best buddy from here on out.”

Her eyebrows shot up into the mop of her white fringe in surprise. “You got the Faun to give up?”

I reached back and plucked Koschei from his perch with a squelch, holding him out to her with a flourish. “Better.”

She did not look happy. Why didn't she look happy? Very carefully, Mercy asked. "Why have you got a head?"

"I always said that the only way to get..."

She cut me off with the kind of glare that could probably kill small mammals or knock birds out of the sky. "If you make a joke right now I'm going to scream. Why do you have a head?"

I wobbled him from side to side, jovially. "This handsome chap is Koschei. He was the Eternal pulling the strings on all the Faun."

"You went in there and killed him?" That omnipresent smirk had faded, and I was starting to get really worried that I'd screwed up. "Just like Leofric wanted?"

"I thought that was what you wanted me to do?" I didn't mean to make it sound like I was mad at her, but damn it, I was. She'd told me to go and make Leo happy, and now I'd done it she was flipping out at me like I'd been the one to do something wrong.

She thumped me in the shoulder, sending me staggering back a step towards the edge. "What the hell?!"

"You wanted me to buddy up with Leo." I waved Koschei's head at her. "This guy is like his nemesis. Leo's going to love it."

"What had happened to you? You were the guy that made us go help some random caravan because it was getting attacked by Svart. You were the guy that made us stop and help everybody we met. If there had been a kitten stuck up a tree, you probably would have been right up there trying to get it down. How do you get from that to murdering somebody just because it is convenient?"

There were whole sections of this conversation that I felt like I'd missed. Like she was talking in code and I didn't know how to translate it. This was not an uncommon experience for me. "I... what?"

"I thought you were a good guy, Maulkin. Even when I saw you go nuts at Seren and do what you did to her, I thought... he just lost his temper. It could happen to anyone." She was looking at me like I'd sprouted another head. Like this was some terrible revelation. "But this is... this was calculated. You killed somebody... A good guy wouldn't do something like this."

"I'm pretty sure we've been killing people since we got here."

She was physically backing away from me now. Unwilling or unable to look me in the eye. "People that were trying to kill us, or people trying to hurt innocent people not just somebody who... got in the way. What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? What's wrong with you?!" The anger boiled up my throat unbidden. I didn't want to do any of this. I didn't want to kill an old Eternal just because it was what was required. If we'd just grabbed the sword and run like hell back at the start then none of this would have happened.

"You're the one who told me to be best buddies with the gold-plated prick. Did you think that we could get there with our hands clean? He is a bad guy. Bad guys like bad things."

"I thought you could..." Her face twisted in something like pain. "I thought you knew the difference between right and wrong. I thought that if it got to the point where you had to decide if you'd do something bad to get on his good side then you'd stop, or we'd trick him or... I guess that was expecting too much of you."

She was backing away faster now, turning and stalking off along the wall. "Mercy..."

"I don't want to talk about this. I don't..." Her voice went deathly quiet. "I don't know if I want to talk to you at all. I need to think about all this."

Still I called after her, "Mercy!?"

She stormed away along the wall, almost crashing right into Leofric as he leapt casually from a courtyard to stand beside her. She did not meet his gaze, but she seemed to shrink away from him unwittingly. I'd never seen her afraid of anything. Or at least, I'd never seen her afraid enough to back down from anything. What had he done while I was gone?

He spread his arms wide as he approached me. Sunlight glinting off all his golden everything. The same feline smile slunk across his face as before he sent me off. "And so my wayward son returns."

"Leofric," I shoved all my feelings back down into a little box and battened it shut as fast as possible. Frantically trying to remember how you were meant to talk like a normal person. "Hi. How are you?"

"What is that between your paws, oh wretched beast of chaos." He said the words like they were a joke, but I could tell that they were real words he would have used to describe me if I hadn't been there. Rude enough to amuse him, but polite enough that I couldn't object. Real class act. He had barely looked at me before his eyes were drawn down to Koschei.

I tossed the head over and he caught it without a hint of effort. "Maybe you recognise him."

He looked bemused as he lifted the severed head up to face level, but it didn't last. His hands shook as he lowered it again. "Koschei? But how can this be?"

Tempting as it was to brag about how I'd managed to bag an Eternal that was so much older and more powerful than me, I wasn't really in the mood after Mercy had been such a downer about it. Besides, this was the moment when everything could go really really wrong for me and old Leo here. "There was a whole lot of chopping involved."

"He was an eternal, just as we are, when he was slain, his flesh should have faded to be reborn. How did you..." He trailed off in wonderment.

"Oh he is extra-dead. Permanently dead. No longer alive. Benefits of having a Lunar Eternal on your team I guess."

Now he was either going to love me or freak out and kill me. It could go either way, depending on whether or not he knew that perma-killing Eternals was a power that only the Voidgod had at his disposal. There was a bit of a gamble involved, but I felt confident in my choice to wave the severed head

around. Koschei had been a Lunar Eternal like me. He had known the limits of what we could do. For all his age, it seemed to me that Leo had never bothered to learn about us.

“You...” His voice was ragged with emotion. I stood frozen in place, gut gurgling with dread as I imagined how the next moment was going to go. A tiny teardrop slipped from his sunbeam eye and trickled down his cheek. “You have given me a great gift this day. The greatest gift. Since the dawn of time, that vicious haunted pygmy was a thorn in my side, and now, finally I am free of him.”

He hoisted Koschei’s head up and roared with laughter and delight. I felt a bit queasy.

Excited and chatty in a way that I’d never expected to see him, Leofric went on. “I had thought that through our combined efforts that he might have been contained or driven off for long enough to prevent him from aiding his dark master when the Voidgod returned, but this... this is a boon beyond all others. You cannot know how long I have... I spoke in jest before, but you are my son now in truth. Bound by a tie deeper than blood. You are my most beloved servant.”

With a sigh, he dropped Koschei’s head like it was trash and crushed it under his shiny golden boot until it popped. Then he took a hold of my shoulders. Ugh this was so awkward. “Uh, thanks... dad?”

He blinked away the tears from his eyes and slapped me on the shoulder with enough force that it set my bones rattling. “You shall be the Warmaster of this great legion when we march upon the Voidgod. All that I have, all that I am, shall be bent to your purpose.”

It had all been worth it. Killing Koschei. Fighting through worms and deserts and scattering the Faun to the four corners of the map. If it got us the help we needed then it didn’t matter if Mercy sulked about it. We were trying to save the world. The universe really; if you bought into the whole thing about all other places being a reflection of Amaranth. That was important. Really important. The most important thing that anyone had ever done, ever. So if I had to do a few things that made me feel crappy along the way, then that is what I’d do. “That is awesome. That... that’s exactly what I need. Araphel is coming, and we need to pull together everyone so that we can stop him before it is too late.”

“My armies are yours. You shall speak as if with my voice.” He put his arm around my back, aiming for the shoulders, but not quite tall enough to reach without twisting weirdly. “All that you need to is command it, and men will spit themselves upon their own blades.”

I let him lead me along the outer wall. Glancing out over the desert beyond. Wondering if I might catch a glimpse of any of the Faun as they got to go and live free at last. “Well, hopefully we won’t need to do much of that.”

“It matters not that they do, it matters only that they will.” He squeezed my back as if it was my shoulder, grabbing a handful of muscle through my armor. It wasn’t sore exactly, just weird. “Such is their loyalty to my cause. To our cause.”

“Uh, good. I guess.” I still felt like I was walking a tightrope every time I spoke to him. Just waiting for me to blurt out the wrong thing and kick off a war.

Why couldn't Mercy have stayed here? Even if she was mad at me she was still better at handling social situation stuff. I mean, she had her own Dvergar fan-club within two minutes of arriving in their city. She could have had Leo eating out her hand. Unless she decided to slap him with it. Which she probably would. Okay, maybe she wouldn't be all that useful, but I still felt like I'd been abandoned in a lion's cage.

He dragged me on, forcing me to pick up my pace as we cleared the length of the giant wall in great strides. "Come now, I am sure that you cannot wait to see Orphia's face when she learns that you have surpassed her and supplanted her in my affections after mere days."

"Okay. Yes." I couldn't help but grin. "That actually sounds like a lot of fun."

"Glorious. Come with me, my son, and witness the next mighty weapon to be added to our arsenal."

Immediately the dread came back. What had they been up to in my absence? I had vague ideas that Mercy might have had the knowhow to teach them how to build a cannon or something, but I knew that she wouldn't have done it. Whatever Leo had found to parade in front of me was going to be something local. Something dramatic probably, judging from the spring in his step as he led me along to see it. Sure, some of that was definitely about the decapitated Koschei, but he'd been in a good mood before we'd even bumped into each other today. And if he was in a good mood, then that almost certainly meant that something really bad was about to happen.

"Imagine if you will, an army that has no need for a supply line behind it. Troop positions that can be reinforced in an instant from anywhere else that soldiers are stationed. How can the Voidgod stand against us, when our forces can be anywhere at any time? When we can strike with all the haste of lightning? Retreat before the adversary can blink?"

It felt like he'd been preparing that speech for a while, so I nodded along with him politely until I abruptly realize what the hell he was talking about. "You're talking about the way-gates."

"Of course!" He chuckled. It was a weird thing, even knowing that he was a real dick, every time that he was pleased, I felt it. I felt happy that I'd pleased him. Like he radiated warmth. Like I was his loyal pet. It was more insidious than the Spirit Strikes that Koschei had unleashed, but no less oppressive. "The other great bounty that you and your companions have brought to the cause."

The Waygate came into sight, down in its courtyard. As did Asher, finally. At least I knew why he hadn't shown up to greet me. Why would he come and help his dearest friend up a wall when there was maths he could be doing. He glanced up as some sunlight deflected off Leofric's armor and hit him in the face, met my eyes for an instant, then he was back to work. What a nerd.

A nerd, surrounded by Leo's soldiers on all sides. None of them looking all that friendly. If they hated me for looking different, I dreaded to think how they'd been treating him. "You do know that only Asher can use them?"

"For now." Leofric's radiating happiness seemed to ratchet up another notch. Glowing all around him as he released my shoulder and made a heroic leap down into the center of the packed dirt square. I jumped down myself, but it wasn't nearly as pretty. I thumped down and staggered forward until he

caught me. Trying not to laugh as he hauled me back upright. Like you'd laugh when the cat fell off the table. "He assures me that the principles are simple enough for any lay-mage to acquire the spells needed to activate them. It was designed as a system of transit all across Amaranth after all, not meant only for the elite geniuses of Talon's academies."

I glanced around at the gathered soldiery. None of them had impressive beards or robes. Mostly they looked tired and dirty. The few beards that were around looked less flowing and more like they'd just forgotten to shave for a few days. "I didn't know you had uh lay-mages."

Orphia stepped out of the shadow of the building I'd made my mad-dash escape through. She was not radiating joy. She was squirting out the opposite feeling. Not in the literal way that Leo was, just being her usual joy and delight to be around. Scowling like if she looked angry enough about my new relationship with Leo, he might change his mind and murder me instead. She was really barking up the wrong tree.

Leofric paid her no mind. Eyes only for Asher. "What we do not have, we can make. There are some among the troops who can wield some measure of the power arcane, it will be a simple task to forge them into the tools that we require."

"So..." I didn't have a damn thing to say about forging people into tools that wasn't going to end in me calling him a tool. "What's the plan for today?"

"Brother Asher means to make a demonstration, I believe. To pass through the gate to whence you originated, and then to return to us bearing some token of that place." He glanced at me, amused. It was so bizarre to be on this side of the inner circle, getting treated to all the good vibes I could stomach. It wasn't hard to see why people like Orphia would end up so desperate to fit in and be part of his gang. He had charisma. Charm. Just like every bully that had ever kicked me in the ass in school before I had my growth spurt and started kicking back. Everyone wanted to be on the bully's good side. To be part of the joke, instead of the butt of it. "I believe that he suggested bringing through a book from Talon's library, though I have my suspicions that it only because he finds the company of my men to be less than intellectually stimulating."

I couldn't help but genuinely smile at that. "Dude loves a good book."

Mercy stepped out from amidst the gathered swarm of troops, slipping through them like she was a gust of air. When she decided to start talking to me again, I was really going to have to ask her how she did it. Everywhere we went, she didn't just fit in, she fit in so well she could slip through unnoticed. Maybe it was something to do with all her stealth skills, but I had a suspicion it was just her. Just like Seren was natural graceful and Asher was naturally snout-first in a book, Mercy blended in.

True to her word, she couldn't even look at me. The fact that Leo had slung an arm around me again probably didn't help. She stepped up beside Asher and started talking in a low urgent tone. I couldn't pick out the words, but from the way that he stilled in his scribbling, I had a pretty good idea of what was up. He didn't look at me either. As if by looking at me he'd be betraying what Mercy was whispering away to him. He very deliberately went back to writing.

Finally letting me out of that vice like hug, Leofric turned to the crowd that had surreptitiously gathered around the top of the walls, waiting for the magic show. “The time has come for the tide of war to turn my friends. No longer must we cling to our fortifications and hope. Now the fight can be taken to the enemy, wherever they reside. In a moment, our dear friend Asher shall stride a thousand leagues in a single step, and soon, each and every one of you shall do the same.”

A ragged cheer went up, but Leo didn’t falter in his speechmaking. “From the safety of this great bastion, we shall be able to reach everywhere that the waystones are built, from the island paradise of Talon’s Keep to the Dverbal Hinterlands and even to the Serpent’s Gate. Everywhere that chaos has spread, we shall bring stability and peace, as easily as stepping from our doorstep!”

The cheer was a bit more coordinated this time around, and it must have been loud enough for Leo to be satisfied. That’s right, the supposed savior of the universe had the same ego as a children’s entertainer, unwilling to move on until he got the clap he thought he was entitled to. The sooner we got away from this psycho the better. He turned to Asher with a wide smile. “Brother Asher, have you had enough time to make your preparations?”

Asher glanced to me for less than a moment, but his deliberately expressionless face immediately set suspicion prickling up the back of my neck. It was hard to get a read on a lizard face at the best of times, and more often than not I was relying on the tilt of his head, the speed of his blinking, even the flick of his tongue to determine what he was feeling when he wasn’t outright telling me. Right now, that deliberate stillness told me nothing. Which was a message in itself. He didn’t want me to know what he was thinking. He gave a precise bow to Leofric, then raised his arms like a conductor, preparing to cast his spell.

If it hadn’t have been for Mercy, I would have had no idea what was about to happen, Asher was the absolute master of the poker face. I never wanted to gamble against him. Mercy on the other hand, she wore her heart on her sleeve, which was just as gruesome to look at as the metaphor implies. All the betrayal and hate and sorrow she was feeling welled up on her face as she met my eyes and for one awful moment I thought she might actually cry.

When it looked like he was about halfway into the elaborate casting, Asher flung his arms back at the waystone. All of the gathered crackling and half-formed magic leapt away from him in a rush, flooding the ring and making it blaze with light.

Mercy leapt through with one last, almost apologetic glance at me. Oh that was not a good sign. She had stepped right on my nuts without feeling the need to apologise before. Asher flung himself backwards once she was through, and the magic crackled out to catch him, whipping him away in a blaze of white hot light into the ring and beyond.

I’d barely taken a step forward when the light died and suddenly I was all alone here, surrounded by enemies again. All eyes turned to me now that the magic show had gone sideways and I had absolutely no rabbits to pull out of hats. “Uh.”

Leofric's hand drifted down to his belt. To the Lucis hanging by his side, radiating power even sheathed. He growled, "What is the meaning of this?"

Orphia did not look confused by this turn of events. She looked delighted. She had already hefted her glaive ready to charge in at me. All she had needed was an excuse and Mercy abandoning ship was exactly the right excuse. I didn't have a Solar to vouch for me anymore. Something that Leo had not specifically commanded had just happened, and control freak that he was, now he was going to have a tantrum about it.

Before he could even start, I turned to Leofric with my hands held up. Look how harmless I am. "I am as surprised as you."

"You don't look surprised." Orphia sniped, as she crept in closer.

I pointed a finger-gun at her face. "Zip it, Stabarella!"

When I glanced back, it was like looking right into the sun. All of Leofric's attention was focused on me. All the light pouring from his eyes was on my face as he studied me. "She is correct, you do not seem at all taken aback that your allies have left you behind."

My voice nearly squeaked. Pretty hard to do when you've normally got the bass sound of tectonic plates humping. "Mercy. She's just a bit... flighty. Maybe she decided she just had to hop back and see some of her friends, or..."

"Or this was all a contrived attempt to gain my trust that has now faltered and they mean to return in force when we least expect it." Leofric had turned to face me now, the crowds of soldiers scattering back, while still trying to keep him in sight. Not because they were scared for the safety of their glorious leader but because they wanted to see the fireworks.

"Dude, we are nowhere near that organized."

His hand still hovered by his hip, fingers flexing. I didn't know what it would feel like if I got hit with that sword. None of the other shards actually did anything at the moment, but I figured that Leo's was different, since it had been reforged. There was definitely some divine power stuck in those hunks of metal and I dreaded to think what it could do if it was unleashed on my body. Maybe if I was lucky, it would only hurt as much as being hit with a sword. Which is a lot. "Perhaps that is why you were left behind in the retreat, this lack of organization."

I couldn't take my eyes off the sword on his hip. Orphia could have been doing the fandango beside me and I wouldn't have even noticed. All of my attention was on him. "Leo, listen. We're on the same side here. We all want Araphel stopped. There is no need for you to do anything... hasty.

He sighed, "I should have known that any gift as grand as the one you presented me would come with a dagger for my back in the other hand."

"No." I rocked back on my heels, hands still right up in the air, empty. Look how harmless I am. You wouldn't hit a Faun with no weapons would you? "No. That isn't..."

“Be silent traitor.”

My eyes darted to her for an instant, just reminding myself where she was. Too close. In striking distance already. “Orphia, if I wanted your opinion... Nope, sorry, that would never happen.”

She didn’t matter. She wouldn’t do anything if I had Leofric on my side. I just had to remind him that we were on the same side. “Listen, Leo. I don’t know why Mercy did that, but it doesn’t change anything. I’m still here, I’m still your Warmaster. We can still take the fight to the Voidgod, yeah?”

There was a flush in his face that I didn’t understand until his brows furrowed down. Here came that tantrum. “You have stolen the most vital armament of our crusade. Snatching the promise of the waystones from us on the eve of our triumphant march.”

I let out a nervous laugh. “Asher will come back any minute now. I’m sure he will, he’s probably just going to pick up a book, just like you planned.”

“They are gone.”

“They have abandoned you.” Orphia added with unbridled joy.

I couldn’t even argue with her. That was exactly what they had done. My only friends in the world, gone. Me, all alone in a castle full of enemies. Two Eternals ready to murder my stupid face off. Mercy’s plan had really screwed me over.

It was time to go back to my plan.

