

Chapter 4

We had to run like hell to get there before fighting broke out, and even with a full-on sprint it was only the sight of Leofric leaping down in all his golden finery to put himself between his men and Mercy's ready arrow that convinced his side to chill out for a second. "Those with the eyes to see would recognize that these are no invaders. They are Eternals, with blood of the same divine providence as I. They are our honored guests, not our foes, and though one may wear the form of the enemy, that does not mean that he himself is our foe. Set your arms aside and your minds to ease."

That might have worked just fine for all of his soldiers but Mercy retrained her arrow on his face before he'd even landed and showed no sign of aiming it anywhere else. After all our fond memories of Orphia, and the joys of meeting Talon, it was hard to trust other Eternals.

It was only when they spotted me clomping along the walkway on the outer wall waving my arms that they seemed to ease off a little, though I couldn't help but notice Mercy hadn't actually eased her bow back so much as temporarily adjusted her aim away from Leofric.

Asher, who I'd usually have considered the more coolheaded of the two, still held a roiling ball of flames between his claws and showed no sign of any plan to quench it. I suppose that given the length of time it took him to get a spell together it was hardly surprising that he didn't want to put it down again until he was completely sure that he wouldn't need it.

Even so, it was kind of embarrassing that Leofric's buddies had dropped everything at the sight of him and I had to clamber awkwardly down a ladder that was clearly built for toddlers to get back down to the courtyard and then jog over to whisper in Mercy's ear before she'd finally let the bowstring ease.

What Leofric didn't know was that I was whispering, "He is a complete psycho but he's got the shard in his sword and he thinks we all want to sign up to join his Eternal dream team."

Of course even that brief moment of peace went to hell the moment that Orphia came into sight on top of the wall.

"Look out!" Mercy yelled as she shoved me aside to line up a kill-shot on the other woman. I was kind of impressed that she could even recognize Orphia after all this time, given that one side of her face was basically a giant bruise at this point after Leofric got slap-happy.

I lunged back into the way, knocking the shot wild so that it soared out over the wall instead of hitting Orphia head on. Mercy kicked me. "What are you doing!?"

"You can't kill her." I said, regret dripping from every word. "She's with Leofric."

Mercy glanced from Eternal to Eternal with dismay. "Her? Really?"

I shrugged. "She saw him first I guess?"

"Couldn't he smell the crazy coming off her?" Mercy couldn't even bring herself to smirk with Orphia in sight. "I smelled it the minute I came through the portal."

Asher finally let his spell splutter and die between his hands. Eyes still darting around the amassed soldiery. "I would imagine that he is accustomed to it."

I stepped in between the two of them and threw my arms around their shoulders before the sass got too far out of control. "I can't believe that you came through to rescue me so soon."

"It was decided by a vote to be more likely that you had forgotten our arrangements than that you had somehow been restrained by enemies and prevented from making your return to us." Asher really was feeling sassy today.

It felt like Leofric couldn't stand to not be the center of attention for a minute. He spread his arms wide and in a booming voice, started in with the sales pitch. "Welcome, my kinfolk, to the Shattered Bastion. The last standing stronghold of the first great crusade against the Adversary, and the holy place from which the next shall be waged."

That set off some rumbling among the crowds of soldiers still packed in all around us. I wasn't sure how I'd feel if my boss's cousins showed up and then he started telling everyone the end was nigh, but I doubted I would have taken it that well. Mercy's brows drew down. "You already knew Araphel is planning a comeback tour?"

"Not all of us are freshly made, some have had time to see the workings of the Adversary still in play in this world. I have been warning of his return since time immemorial. From the very day he was slain, I set myself to prepare for his return, and to proselytize to those who were doubtful of his survival. When young Orphia came to us, telling her tragic tale of betrayal and prophecy, I knew that the time must be nigh. Ever have I rallied the stout of heart to my banner, to man the Bastion and prepare to hold back the tides of darkness. Now it became clear to all why this was not mere vanity or paranoia, but necessity."

My gods did that man love the sound of his own voice. I mean, holy crap. It was like a divinity all on its own, the sheer weight of his relentless boringness pounding down on you. I swear I was swaying on my feet by the time I replied, "I'm glad somebody is taking it seriously at least. Most of the folks we've met so far didn't even believe Araphel existed, let alone that he was coming back."

"You shall find only the faithful here. Faithful and armed for the coming battle in body and mind. I can think of few calls to arms with more potency than Orphia's warning. All the righteous of Amaranth have rallied to us."

A quick glance at the "righteous" massed around us made me kind of dubious about their righteousness. They looked less like holy warriors and more like the desperate dregs who'd been drawn in by the promise of a roof over their head, food in their belly and an opportunity to stab anybody that was wearing a different color uniform, or looked different from them.

"I wouldn't believe everything she says." Mercy looked like she was pointing at Orphia for a second before I realized that her extended finger was the middle one and it was pointed straight up, not at the wall.

Leofric chuckled, "She said much the same of you, though in less kindly terms."

When he laughed, it felt like you were being washed over with warm water. Wrapped up in a big hug. Maybe his voice wasn't a power, but he was definitely radiating some sort of aura. Whatever else you wanted to say about him, he had presence.

I wanted to say a lot of other stuff about him, but I couldn't when he was standing right there.

"Come, my new kin, let us find you quarters and provide you with a lay of the land. There is much of this world that you cannot yet know. Secrets that only my experience has unraveled. Allow me the honor of sharing the wisdom of the ages with you."

That was one drastic a change of tone from when he thought he had me at his mercy earlier. Suddenly he was all buddy buddy, you're my blood brothers, let me tell you how pretty you are. Maybe it was because the others were Solar Eternals and he genuinely thought that they were all on the same side. Maybe it was because they didn't look like Faun and he was a racist dick-bag just like his loyal follower-slash-punching bag. Maybe he had undergone a drastic change in attitude as a result of personal growth and from now on he was going to set aside all that world domination stuff. Or maybe, and most likely in my estimations, now that there were three of us, he wasn't so sure that his ass wasn't the one that would get kicked if it came to a fight.

I think I'd probably have liked him better if he'd gone on being a megalomaniacal asshole. At least I could trust that. This new guy, trying to get on our good side, I had no idea what he wanted.

After seeing where the soldiers had been sleeping, I was expecting to be ushered into something similar, but instead we looped around the wall with the Waystone ring set in it and headed further along the Bastion to another section that had been rebuilt from those red-bricks into something quite a bit more substantial.

Orphia trailed along behind us, far enough back that I didn't feel any worry about her stabbing us in the back any time soon. She was still limping. Her face slowly swelling up as she scowled after me. As if I was the reason for all her suffering.

The whole time that we walked, Leofric gestured grandly about him, telling us of the repairs that they'd undertaken, the battles that they'd waged to clear monsters from the ruins, everything was a story with him, and it looked like he delighted in telling them. Still in love with the sound of his own voice.

At least it saved the rest of us from having to do much of the conversational heavy lifting and freed us up to have a good look around the place. There were a lot of people here. A lot more than I'd seen during my mad rush along the Bastion. The fact that they were spread thin along a structure this massive didn't make their numbers any less.

The farms that were set back into the green pastures behind the wall couldn't possibly have been providing enough food for this many. For a standing army this big, the whole of the country beyond must have been funneling resources towards this one place.

I almost walked into the back of Leofric as he waved grandly at the little townhouse he had set aside for "honored guests."

"Awesome, give us two minutes to find our beds then we can go on the grand tour, right?" I smiled down at him as broadly as I dared. I really was not built for lying.

“By all means,” All of his flattery and grandiose storytelling had been directed towards the other two up until this point. So having to address me directly again, while still maintaining that degree of pleasantry, seemed to be a struggle for him. “It is my desire for you to feel comfortable here.”

Inside the red-brick building that occupied what had once been a completely levelled section of the great wall, we found our quarters. The furnishings weren’t exactly lavish, but they weren’t bedrolls on the dirt floor like everyone else had to deal with either. The place was on two levels, it had timber floors that definitely weren’t made of scrap-wood like the other ramshackle parts that had been hammered together and tied to the side of the bastion. There was even furniture inside that wouldn’t have looked too far out of place in the luxury of Talon’s Keep. The top floor was divided up into bedrooms, which our escort of guards offered up to us as if they were the greatest gift we’d ever had bestowed on us. Mercy snorted when she saw the expectant look on her personal guide’s face. “Dude, I’ve seen a bed before. It isn’t that exciting.”

That guy was scowling almost as much as Orphia as he sulked back downstairs.

I kicked the door shut behind him and turned to the other two. “Okay here’s the plan. We kill Leofric, grab the sword and jump through the magic ring before all the minions pile on us.”

Mercy and Asher looked at each other, then back to me. Mercy was the one to say what they were both, apparently, thinking. “Or we could just... not.”

“What? The dude is a total psycho, just like Orphia. If you don’t do exactly what he says then you’re his enemy.” I realized that my whole plan to not talk to loud was falling apart rapidly, and switched to a stage whisper. “He definitely needs to not be alive anymore.”

“Maulkin, he’s an eternal.” Mercy rolled her eyes. “It isn’t like he’d stay dead. And if we kill him then that is another enemy for life, chasing after us and trying to get his shard back, just like Briar by Moonlight and the Alvaren. Don’t we have enough enemies already.”

Asher cocked his head to the side. “You do make an unfortunate habit of collecting nemeses wherever you go.”

Mercy cocked her head the other way. “Nemesis-es?”

“Besides, it kind of looks like he’s on our side, right? Out to beat the Voidgod?” She was doing that thing again, when she spoke really slowly, with a kind of sing song voice. Like she was the presenter on some kids tv show trying to teach me the names of colors. “Plus he’s got an army. An army could come in real handy. Maybe we just listen to his sales pitch.”

I felt like I was running out of ammunition rapidly now that they’d decided to ignore the two very important reasons to murder him; that he had something we wanted and that he was a dick. “He hit Orphia for talking back to him.”

Mercy looked exasperated. “Good! You should have hit her too. With your sword. So she stopped looking at me. And breathing.”

I turned to Asher, hoping for him to be the voice of reason, but while he usually trusted my gut, this time he seemed to be headed in an anti-gut direction. “I must admit that the prospect of harm coming to our onetime companion does not fill me with trepidation.”

"I don't care that she got hit, I care that he..." Why wasn't I better at talking? If I could just explain to them what he'd been like up on the rooftop before they arrived then maybe they'd understand. I could picture it perfectly in my head but I just couldn't get it into words. Instead I finished up with a lame duck. "Listen, he's a bad guy. Okay!?"

Mercy had sauntered over to press on the mattress and see how comfortable it was, not even pretending that she was actually listening to me anymore. "Sure. Okay. You don't like him. We get it."

"You don't get it!" I turned to Asher with desperation starting to creep into my voice. "He thinks he's better than everyone else. He thinks we should rule the world, just because we're Eternals."

Mercy flopped on the bed, then popped back up on her elbows to scoff. "Don't you spend half your time talking about how awesome we are?"

My mouth opened and shut a few times until I managed to blurt out, "That's just because the three of us are awesome people, not because we were born with powers... I think Seren's awesome too."

"I should not present Mercy with further evidence of your questionable judgement, if I were you." Asher had leaned in close to whisper this in a conspiratorial way, but Mercy heard him and let out a harsh bark of laughter.

"So he thinks that we should be in charge. Why shouldn't we be?" She rocked back up onto her feet. "I'm not saying we're better than everyone we've met since we got here, but we were literally chosen by the gods to come down here and save the world."

"Yeah, save it." I grumbled. "Not crown ourselves kings of it."

"Queen. And I'd totally rock a crown."

Asher glanced over to her with something like a frown. It was hard to tell without eyebrows. "Mercy."

"Oh come on." She laughed. "I totally would!"

"The accessories involved, and how you would appear while wearing them, are not the matter in question." Asher sighed.

Mercy rolled her eyes and flopped back on the bed again, "Fine! So if it looks like he is going full-on world domination dictator we stop him, but that doesn't mean we can't get along for now."

"I don't like this." That was it. That was the best argument I could come up with.

"So don't like it." Mercy scoffed. "You think we liked it when you dragged us into all the messes we've been through so far? Maybe it is your turn."

Asher shrugged miserably when I looked to him for support. "Making use of the resources that Leofric has at his disposal to pursue our shared goals seems to be the most practical course, for now."

"Fine." I strode over and hauled Mercy up. "Fine! Let's go do the grand tour. See all the places he's going to hang the chopped off bits of you when he decides you aren't being a good obedient slave."

“Oh my gods,” Mercy groaned, going limp in my arms and making me carry her across the room. “You are so overdramatic.”

“Bet you there is at least one dangling corpse.” I dumped her on the floor in a heap and she scrambled back up to standing.

Asher paused. “What would the stakes of this wager be?”

She didn’t even have to think about it. “If I win, he has to stop making out with Seren in public.”

If that was how she wanted to play it. “If I win, she has to start making out with Seren in public.”

“Oh gross.” She shoved me away. “Why are men like that?”

“What do you mean? I just want you two to start getting along.” I wagged my eyebrows at her.

“Everyone gets along better when they’re making out.”

Asher’s tongue flicked out. Tasting the air as he thought it through. “Does this mean that you wish for the three of us to ‘make out’?”

Mercy and I both looked at each other in stunned silence for a second, both of us trying to fight back the laughter that was bubbling up inside us.

Mercy managed to pat him on the shoulder. “We get along just fine already.”

“That is true.” He conceded, as I almost choked on the laugh still caught in my throat.

My list of priorities shuffled. Killing the Voidgod had dropped to second place. Number one was now making sure that Asher never *ever* found out what making out was.

Downstairs and out the door as fast as I could get away from that conversation, Leofric was waiting, with his arms spread wide. “It is my dearest hope that you find pleasant rest within the shelter of my walls.”

“Yeah, the beds look great.” I gave him an awkward thumbs up. “Thanks for that.”

“As Eternals, our lot in life is to wander where fate and duty take us. Very rarely has either taken me to places of great comfort. As such, I do my best to see to it that such things are available to us where I can. So that you might know that there is more than hardship in Amaranth.”

Oh wow, the sales pitch was starting early. Stick with me kid, I’ll give you the comfiest seats in the world.

When it became apparent that we weren’t completely won over by the promise of pillows, he snapped his fingers and an open topped wagon drew up alongside us. The things I’d spotted earlier definitely were not horses. They had that same lanky build, but there was no question that the creature drawing this cart was not a herbivore.

Bestiary tickled at the back of my mind, providing me with the name of the critter. Chollima. They were carnivores alright, predatory pack-hunting horses with wide open mouths packed to the brim with row after row of shark-like teeth. Blessed with the same tireless energy that empowered the Chagnar Faun. There was no fuzzy coat on their bare skin, no flowing manes either. Either one of them would have become clotted and matted because these things sweated blood while they ran.

Looking down I could see trails of that blood on the ground, spattered and dried out dozens of times over across the gravel filled tracks running along the length of the wall. This must have been how they meant to reinforce and supply different areas if the Bastion did come under attack. Terrifying meat ponies to the rescue.

Out of some old habit I reached out to pet the vaguely horsey thing on its muzzle and nearly lost a finger for my trouble before the driver got it under control. Mental note: do not try to pet the terrifying meat ponies.

“If you will climb aboard, we shall take in the full extent of the Shattered Bastion. Much fallen from its former glory.” I looked over at Mercy, fully intending on giving her a very meaningful look that meant “Please let me kill this asshole,” but she was already hauling herself up onto a bench in the back.

With me Asher and Leofric packed in there beside her, it was... cozy. The three of them took up once side and I had the other, with my back to the wall. That suited me fine. I’d rather keep my eyes on Leofric in case this was all just the set up for a stab in the back, and to see more of the kingdom beyond this one fortification that he was clearly so in love with.

I took a history class once upon a time, back when I thought college might have been a good idea. And there had been this one lecturer talking about what we thought of as the big wars, explaining that before the industrial revolution, you couldn’t really get a battle going with as many people because there needed to be folk back at home doing the heavy lifting to keep the front-line folks supplied. She’d said that most medieval kingdoms could only support a tiny standing army, because of the ratio of non-fighters required. I wished that I’d paid a bit more attention, because I was damned if I could remember what that ratio was.

The main thing I felt certain of was that this human kingdom we’d landed on the angriest border of had to be pretty big to keep all these soldiers fed, armored and housed. Not to mention providing a steady supply of jerky for all the meat ponies.

So while Mercy and Asher ooh-ed and aaah-ed at the amazing architectural feats that somebody had melted behind me, I peered off towards those puffs of smoke on the horizon and tried to map them out in my head, working out just how many little villages were out there. How many people had to be living out there? Just living totally normal medieval farmer lives in Amaranth without any monsters stomping through, any mountains collapsing, or any of the other crazy crap that we’d been seeing since the moment that we first arrived. Maybe we just landed on the wrong side of the wall and everything was nice over here?

I twisted around to take a look at the wall every so often when the other two made impressed noises. There was no denying that it was an impressive hunk of rock. Probably even more impressive if you didn’t know how to reach out to the rock beneath your feet with your divine power and drag it up into a giant wall with pure will alone.

Beyond the little shacks that they’d erected as barracks, there was a fully functional smithy further along the line, a farrier, a fletcher, a butcher, a baker, I looked for a candlestick maker but Leofric explained that they burned torches soaked in oil as wax was prohibitively expensive.

Mercy was the only one who might have got the joke, and she didn’t want it.

There was a whole city built into the long line of wall. Most of it latched on parasitically long after the original structure had been built and partially destroyed, but some of it burrowed right into the old Bastion's corpse. For instance, the butcher's had sides of meat dangling inside a hollowed out section of the old wall where the devastation had eaten clean through and made a sort of natural looking cave, complete with withered looking stalactites of surviving stone for them to tie the meat up on.

I was so checked out by the end of the grand tour of the longest wall in the world that it took me a moment to understand Leofric was finally telling us something important. "...the most loyal servants of the adversary still raid against the Bastion, seeking both to tear down the memorial to those who defied him and to claim the lands beyond for their dark master."

I interrupted him before he could launch into his next soliloquy about some brave warrior or other who had bled to keep the monsters out. "Who are these loyal servants exactly? Because we haven't really bumped into any yet."

Leofric's moustache twitched again, irritated at the interruption, but willing to indulge my apparently stupid question. "The natural allies of the dark one are the wicked Dvergar who first freed him from his stone prison, the void-spawn that he wrought from his own flesh to spread wickedness across all of creation and of course the uh..." He looked momentarily uncertain for the first time since I'd met him. "The Chagnar."

"You think the dvergar are evil?" Mercy said at the same time as I asked, "The Faun are attacking this place?"

I got the impression that old Leofric wasn't really ready for the questions and answers section of the tour yet, and he looked with regret as some landmark or other rolled by without his commentary. "While some Dvergar may have turned from their wicked path and embraced the gods, there is no denying that their sin was what brought the revelation upon us. Their demanding and seeking caused all of this. That is why they hide their faces now, they are riddled with shame. And rightfully so."

His tone went from conciliatory to barely restrained disgust when he turned to me. "As for the Chagnar, those vile beastmen have always been a thorn in the side of all that is good in this world. Only recently have they gathered the courage enough to launch forays against us here on the Bastion. Some dark power is uniting the disparate tribes of them under a single banner and rallying them against us. Against me."

"It is difficult to conceive of a good enough reason for any tribal society to throw themselves upon fortifications this substantial." Asher noted, forcing Leofric to concede a little ground again.

He did not like being questioned, but it seemed clear to me now that he was desperate enough for the help of the other two that he'd tolerate it, at least temporarily. It was a stark change from the way he'd treated me and Orphia. "Truth be told, there are folk tales passed among the peasantry that this land once belonged to the Chagnar, that it was their hunting ground before the revelation and that they seek to reclaim it. While I must denounce these tales as heresy, I cannot deny in my heart that there may be some seed of truth buried within them."

He shrugged and turned back to his great wall. "Who can truly say who owned this land in antiquity, in the unplumbed darkness before even Eternal memories reach?"

Mercy raised an eyebrow. "The faun, apparently."

"The faun..." He almost spat the name of that race before getting his temper back under control. "If we were to believe their lies then every stretch of land was once their sacred hunting ground. They claim to be the firstborn of Amaranth, that all this world was once theirs before the Wyrms Wars. Were we to cede territory to them each time they claimed it was their heritage, we would have to live in the sea."

I resisted the urge to tell him to get in the sea as we trundled on in silence for another minute or so.

"So you're having some Faun troubles." Mercy had a speculative look on her face that I was instantly suspicious of. "You want us to go talk it out with them?"

"You cannot believe that the Chagnar can be reasoned with? That they would listen to the words of their most hated enemies? The moment that their sentries laid their eyes upon you, a swarm of the beastmen would be unleashed. You would be surrounded and slaughtered before a word slipped from your lips." There was the Leofric I knew and didn't love, barely concealed contempt reverberating underneath the surface level of politeness.

She nodded over at me, that same smug smile hovering on her lips. "What about him?"

My voice came out in a bass rumble. "What about me?"

Asher was studying me intently, head bobbing as the cart went over little bumps and lumps in the gravel road. Grinding deeper and deeper into the well-worn ruts. "While it is true that they would identify Maulkin from a distance as one of their own kind, the moment that he was close enough the illusion would falter, surely from the moment that they perceive his ocular glow it will be clear to them that he is an Eternal."

The voice of sanity had finally arrived in the building. "Exactly. Definitely wouldn't work."

"His eye glow is pretty dim." Mercy peered at me. "He might get away with it."

"Your serpentine companion has the right of it, dim as his light may be, there is no mistaking the gaze of an eternal..." The wheels were turning under blondie's golden hair. Just like Mercy intended them too. I swear she was more dangerous with her mouth than she was with her bow. He paused for just a moment, then let his thoughts come tumbling out to ruin my day. "However, it is well known that the Chagnar worship the hideous gods of the Lunar courts. They might consider one of that pantheon's Eternals to be their natural ally, particularly if he came clad in the flesh of a Faun."

Mercy clapped her hands and sat back with a smug smile. "So just like that, problem solved. Maulkin can go in, find out what their deal is and negotiate a cease-fire or whatever. Bring everyone to the table to work things out."

Leofric scoffed. "It is your belief that centuries of warfare can be brought to an end through conversation?"

"My boy Maulkin, here. He's super diplomatic." She leaned over to pat me on the shoulder and I shrugged her off. She put her hand back, so I shrugged it off again. She did this three times before

finally settling for slapping me on the knee instead. I couldn't move that out of the way in the cramped wagon. "I mean, he showed up here and made friends with you right off the bat. Right?"

"Indeed he did." Those wheels in his head weren't turning now, they were spinning so fast you could imagine smoke was going to start pouring out of Leo's ears any second now. "Why, if he were to engage the Chagnar leadership with that same diplomacy then I could imagine that our conflict would be brought to an abrupt end."

Mercy clapped again. Aggressively. Right in front of my face. "Perfect."

We went over one last bump and then rolled to a stop back where we'd first started out. There was some drumming and barking of orders going on at the side of the road opposite the wall, but I was too busy seething at Mercy for signing me up to be this asshole's assassin. "Uh... do I get a say in all this?"

She laughed at that and I honestly felt like hitting her. "Does this look like a democracy?"

Behind them, the rickety wood that I'd smashed down off the side of the Bastion as I climbed had been reconstructed into a hasty set of gallows. The upper beam of it was bowing under the weight of all the bodies.

A dozen men and women swung gently in the breeze. Every one of the soldiers from down in the square when I'd first arrived was up there. I was pretty sure I recognized the crossbow-woman who'd clipped me in the shoulder too. Spinning slowly at the end of the line.

For a moment, I couldn't even understand what I was looking at, then the reality of it sank in, and the awful logic behind it. This was Leofric's idea of an apology.

"No." It slipped out like a whisper. "No it doesn't."