

## Chapter 10

His eyes did not widen now. All the surprise that he'd made a great show of earlier was absent. "So the assassin finally reveals his true nature. When trickery did not avail him, he turned to..."

"Shove story-time up your scrawny ass." He actually seemed shocked that someone had interrupted him. "There are no Faun around to believe the trash you're trying to spin into gold anyway."

He rose slowly to his feet. Coming up to about my knees, but radiating such power in the close confines of the cave that it overwhelmed me. His voice beat in on me from every side. The power of his Aether hammering at all my senses. "First you tried to sway me from my course with lies, and now you seek my end, well I must tell you that it shall not come at your hands, you mewling whelp. I've outlived stars in the sky while you've yet to reach the span of a single lifetime."

He knew everything about me. He'd was digging around in my skull even now. He knew everything that I had to say, before I said it. I said it anyway. "I'm not working with Leofric. I'm not some..." Pain lanced through my head as he probed deeper. Forcing every word to come out true in a great wild rush. "I didn't come here to kill you but you've rigged the whole of Faun civilization up so that the only ones that people will listen to are the strongest. You've made it so that when Araphel comes back, they'll go running back to him with open arms. I've got to put an end to all that, right now. But because of your stupid 'might makes right' setup, if I want the Faun to listen to me, I've got to beat you."

"And what shall you tell them to do, in this imaginary world where you could best me." He whispered it into my ear and I spun to see nothing there amidst the maelstrom of Aether.

Actually talking was becoming more and more difficult. All my senses had been dulled down by this place, and suddenly being exposed to all his dazzling Aether was like ripping off a blindfold and staring straight into the sun. I could feel my brain vibrating inside my skull, and still he poured out more and more. The weight of his power, of his will, was pressing in on me from every direction. Crushing me. "I'll tell them to go find somewhere that the living is easy. I'd tell them to farm and frolic and fornicate and do all the other f things that people are meant to do to be happy and healthy."

I had no idea where he was now. The swirling ghosts of his memories intermingled with my own. Throwing up glimpses of the places we'd been like I was seeing them through a hall of mirrors. The bloody forest with giant mushrooms traipsing through. Some barren wasteland covered in purple scrub with the great stone tablets of some ancient civilization ground down to gravel. The Alvaren city, trapped beneath the earth. The battlefield that this place had once been, sun blotted from the sky by the wings of Voidspawn beasts. When Koschei spoke, his voice beat at me from every direction. Louder than anything I'd ever heard. "You would make weaklings of them."

"I'd give them their lives back, to do what they wanted with them." It came out like a whimper instead of a roar. He was getting in my head. He was making me believe that I was powerless compared to him. When there was a display like this going on, it was hard not to be shocked by the disparity in power

between us. The first blow hadn't even been struck and I already felt like I was dying. "You're meant to be all about freedom, don't you want that for them?"

He hammered the difference between us into me like the nails of a coffin. "Only the strong are truly free. All others must bend to their might."

How could I hope to fight back against him? He had thousands of years to grow in power and I'd been here for the blink of an eye. I'd spent more time dicking around in the jungle with Seren than I had actually doing anything important. All the glory I'd fought so hard for was nothing compared to his. I was nothing, and he was everything and I should just get down on my knees right now and grovel for forgiveness.

He was strong. I was weak. He was so close to being a god, and I was so close to being dirt.

I might as well just give up now. I might as well just lay down and let him kill me. If he thought that was what was best, I should just obey him. He was so much more than me, so he must be right. The strong ruled the weak. That was the way of the world. That had always been the way. Everywhere.

But when I opened my mouth, the words that came were not the abject submission that I was compelled to offer. Instead, I rumbled out, "You sound like Leofric."

I guess that wasn't what he wanted to hear. There was a moment, just a brief moment, where I could grab a breath, before he came pounding back in on me with all of his power and the crushing certainty that he was better than me in every single way. My own feeble Aether power flared up in that breath, but it just weren't up to the task of holding him off, not when he was bringing it all to bear. I had no idea what his pillar of Aether looked like, but if it was smaller than a redwood I'd be extremely surprised.

The spear had fallen from my hands at some point, and I couldn't even see where it had landed. Not that I'd need a weapon to throw myself at his mercy and beg for forgiveness like a worthless idiot like me should.

He'd pushed me too far. That last pulse of emotion was tinged with his irritation, both at me talking back to him, and my continuing to resist. He was angry at me for not realizing how worthless I was. The joke was on him. I always knew what I was worth. I had always known, even back when I spent my life slobbering around in front of a television doing nothing, that I was awesome.

I closed my eyes and slipped out of my body. It was even scarier out here than it had been inside. At least in my body I'd had the dull sensation of stone beneath my feet to ground me, even if my Artifice insisted that it wasn't there. Without the anchor of flesh, all of the spirits that Koschei was invoking against me became visible and terrifying. Sweeping in and out of my head, one after the other. All that effort to charge in and make me feel like crap.

Shame that there was nobody home.

He'd realise in a moment that I was gone, but for now I could think clearly without being bombarded. I still couldn't see where he was through the frankly ridiculous number of spirits he'd called up to flood

the room, but my senses did latch onto one solid thing in all of the swirling chaos. The solid iron spear I'd carried in with me.

It was an anchor back to reality. Solid metal. Rough hewn by my shoddy Artifice skills. Pointy at one end. Long. Otherwise unremarkable. Useless where it was lying.

A simple flex of my will made it a sword once more, another tug brought it back to my hands through the swirl of incorporeal abuse. Clearing the ghosts away for just a moment.

I had to drop back into my body to catch the sword, and all at once I was bombarded again. Koschei was upping the intensity of his brain-crushing. Pouring all of his power out in Aether, summoning up every spirit he had at his disposal and launching it into me with the clear message that I was worthless. I was less than him, less than everyone.

I had a sword in my hands, but what use was a sword against that power, against that crushing knowledge that I was useless and worthless and pitiful. It couldn't cut the certainty out of my head.

But, thanks to Psychometry, it could cut the summoned spirits that were putting that certainty there. With heavy limbs, burdened with the knowledge that it was pointless to fight back, I swung.

The first swing was as useless as he made me think it was going to be. Awkward and clumsy like I'd never held a sword before. The tip struck the stone in front of me and I nearly lost my grip. Another wave of despair took me. Why was I even trying. I was nothing. I was scum. I was a rat.

Anger boiled up inside my gut. I was a rat that had been backed into a corner. This time when my sword came up it sang. Whistling through the air, first up, then around. Practicing the perfect defense that Seren had been forcing me to drill through day after day, every angle of attack blocked and parried with each sweeping rotation of the blade. Everywhere it struck a spirit, that spirit fragmented into the same nothingness. I wasn't nothing. They were nothing. They weren't even alive.

Still the torrent came on and on, dread and fear and loathing turned aside with a slash. Self-pity skewered through when it tried to lunge at me from behind. There was no end to all of the spirits that Koschei could summon, but there was no end to my dance either. The leaden weight of my inferiority melted away as my muscles began to burn.

My blade moved faster and faster, this great iron slab spinning like a ballet dancer around me, guided by my strength, by my certainty in my own skill. Practice had made perfect. Not one of the ghosts made it to me unscathed, and the few that came limping in were garbled and mangled, bearing tiny broken fragments of the thoughts that they were meant to convey.

I was weaker than Koschei. That was all the first one to drift over me managed to whisper, and I almost laughed out loud. Of course I was weaker than him. Everything was weaker than a demi-god with thousands of years to build himself up, what did that matter?

I was younger than him, he knew better than me. Everyone I'd ever met thought they knew better than me, why would I start believing them now?

I could not defeat Koschei. If that was true, then why was he so scared of fighting me that he'd rather blast me with a million ghosts than actually try his luck?

Koschei kept on going, dumping more and more of them on me, trying to wear me down, and entirely forgetting the first thing that I had learned about this Faun body of mine. It did not tire. Faun are Relentless. The longer this went on, the more of his resources he burned through, whereas me? I could do this all night, and every swing just got better and better.

The certainty that he had put into me crumbled in the face of my questions. The doubts that he was trying to put into me were coming from him. He was the one who was afraid. He was the one that didn't know how this was going to end. I was a giant horny god of death and he was a little goblin hiding in a cave and he expected me to cower before him?

I was breathing hard, but not too hard to bark out a laugh. "It isn't working, old man."

He was completely justified in blasting me at that point.

[703/890 Health]

A blinding ray of azure light cut through the swirl of ghosts and hit me square in the chest. Ice spread out from it, crackling across my armor, my skin, the chill sinking down into me, bringing the frantic hammering of my heart to an abrupt stop.

Still the cold spread, even as I stood there dead on my feet. I couldn't breathe, I couldn't move. One shot had been all that it took to end me. All this time, he'd just been toying with me.

I fell to my knees with no strength to keep my weight up, and the swirl of spirits departed. Koschei brushing them away with a flick of his wrist. "You were never my match, and you were a fool to think you might be."

Still the ice spread, creeping up my neck, down my waist, encasing me in a crackling crystalline shell. Sapping the warmth of life from my dying body wherever it went.

Confidence returning to him, Koschei strolled in closer. "You could have served a purpose. You could have fought by my side, but instead this is what you choose?"

Deep within my chest, my heart thumped. The cold had not stopped it, just slowed it to such a crawl that I barely had the strength to stay conscious. Something must have shown on my face, because Koschei tutted. "Did you think me an old doddering fool? Ready to cast you back out into the world to gather strength and attack me again when I least expect it? Do you think that you are the first Eternal that I have defeated in all my years? The first of my opponent's pieces that I have taken from the board?"

The ice had me coated up to the chin and was down past my knees, spreading across the floor and pinning me in place in a big solid chunk of frozen water. It was cool down here, even before the ice he'd summoned. With a lurch, I understood what he had planned. I was going to be an icicle for the rest of eternity. Trapped like some fossil, but awake and aware of it the whole time.

Hell no.

Two pillars within me flared to life, Primal and Ascension. The strength flooded back through my body as Restoration undid the damage of the ice-blast and then it doubled up as I surged my potency.

Like the big buff man I was, I flexed right out of the ice.

It burst out from around me in a shower of chunks, spritzing Koschei and giving me the moment I needed to fall forward and scoop my sword up in my hands. He was surprised, but he wasn't taken by surprise. His hands were surrounded in a nimbus of that same azure light, his stance the casual combat readiness I could see in Seren before we sparred. Loose and limber.

I struck. Sweeping my sword up from the floor and into a wild thrust that might have gotten lucky. It didn't. He slapped the flat of the blade aside, leaving a frosty handprint, and he had his other hand clawed and reaching for me as I stumbled forward.

No thank you. Once in the icebox was quite enough for one day.

He might have knocked the thrust wide, but I had already been aiming down as well as forward thanks to the height difference. It didn't take much of a twist to make my blade jam down into the stone floor, jarring me to a halt and sending an ache all the way up to my shoulders.

His hand couldn't quite reach me as it swiped by.

Before he could recover and lunge at me I staggered back. I had reach on my side, unless he decided to blast me again. Which he probably would if he had any sense.

He blasted me again.

This time I knew what was coming, and I managed to get my sword around into the path of the ray before it could strike. It reflected neatly off the pocked and ugly side of the great cleaver blade and traced a think line of frost up the wall to the side of him.

I worked out I could angle it at him the same moment he did, so even as I struggled to twist my sword against the torrent of freezing energy he was squirting out his fist like a firehose, he abruptly cut it off.

We began to circle each other, waiting for our opportunity. Still he seemed intent on boring me to death with speeches instead of actually fighting. "You have some tricks, I cannot deny that, but they will not avail you against true power."

I growled back. "You didn't dig deep enough in my head when you had the chance."

He sneered. "You would invite me back in?"

I gave my sword a turn in my hands, trying to get some feeling back after my time as a popsicle. "How about I share my secrets the old fashioned way?"

He laughed in my face and hammered his fists together, sending a wave of freezing air out through the room that crusted my eyelashes with frost and made the floor slick and slippery. "You have no secrets. I have seen it all. All as I might have expected from a tag-along lackey of the Solar Court."

Another clap of his hands and another arctic breeze sweeping through. He didn't even need to fight me really. He could just keep chilling me down until I was useless. Restoration and Potency Surge wouldn't be recharged for ages. I'd be a big cartoon ice-cube with horns sticking out long before then.

"You saw what you expected to see, but you didn't see everything. You didn't see the things that your Aether couldn't touch."

He scoffed, "There is no power in this world that could hide the whole of you from my sight."

I swung for him and he slipped around me with almost casual ease. Darting in to slap at my leg and making me dance out of reach. Puffs of my breath drifting between us. All these years building up that tiny body of his, there was no limit to his speed. To his strength. Good thing that I'd intrigued him enough that he was still playing with me. "Araphel could do it."

"No being still living in this world could do it." He rolled his eyes. Moonlight strobing over the cave roof. "Unless your deranged tale of the Voidgod returning from the dead involve him appearing right behind me at this moment. I do not think that I have anything to worry about."

He tried for another blast at me. The startlingly bright blue ricocheting off my blade right back at him and making him dodge aside. I tried to rush in, but the impact of the beam attack had knocked me back on my heels, so I lost the precious fraction of a second when he was off balance and he was ready before I could get near enough to swing.

We circled again as my poor battered brain tried to come up with a plan. I let my mouth run in the meantime. "The only person that I could trust with my secret is somebody who is about to die. Someone I know is going to take it to their grave."

He rushed in, almost jovial as he swept by my clumsy parry and punched into my ribs. It sent a sharp shot of pain and chill up through me. Something cracked when he hit me, but I couldn't say if it was bone breaking or ice forming inside me.

He gloated as I stumbled away, gasping for breath. "Then you could not have chosen more poorly. As you know all too well. I am Eternal."

I let the pain and exhaustion show, letting my sword droop down until I was leaning on it. One lung was frosted shut inside me and the other was working double time and still struggling. The chill was slowing my heart again, but it was still thrumming away thanks to all the adrenaline rushing through me.

When I turned my head back up, he had closed the distance between us and was readying another blow. "So was Talon. Right up until the moment he wasn't."

He froze in place, as if all that Creation energy had been turned back on him. "Archmage Talon?"

"He had the shard soul-bound to him." I pushed myself back up to my full height as he gawked at me. "There was only one way to break that bond."

His eyes widened as he read the truth of my words on my face. "No."

I took a step forward, leaving my sword standing wedged in the stone behind me. I stalked after Koschei as it was his turn to step back. "I already told you Chernghast gave me the power."

"Chernghast could not." Spittle flew from his lips as his rage and confusion bubbled out. He was an old man, set in his ways, that was what he'd said. He couldn't even comprehend a world different from what he already knew. Just the thought of it made him angry. "No god of the Solar or Lunar court can end the life of an Eternal. Their nature is as ours. They are beings of creation. The only god who could grant such a gift would be..."

"Araphel."

I reached for the dark pillar inside me, not to use it, just to taste it. To touch it. To let the darkness within me show in my eyes. I could not see the eyes in my own head of course, but I could see every detail that the darkness had hidden from me before spring into sharp contrast, things that I'd had to rely on my eyes weak glow to illuminate before.

Koschei could see it. He saw the light in my eyes die and the darkness fill them. That same impossible darkness, so devoid of light that it hurt to look right at it. I had him off balance before, confused and angry, but now I had him afraid.

"No. You cannot be. He... he is dead. He could not make Eternals. There are... it is impossible. Impossible!" As if he could punch my existence away, he swung at me with all his might. It struck me in the gut, full force. I made no attempt to get out the way. I made no attempt to stop it. Something inside my muscled torso popped under the pressure of the blow and agony spread throughout me.

[626/890 Health]

I accepted that blow as my due. I accepted the pain in exchange for what it gave me. What did it give me? It gave me a firm grasp on the little bastard's wrist.

He tried to pull it back, to rip himself free of my grasp, but I had been through this before and I followed along with him instead of trying to hold him still. It didn't matter where he went now. It didn't matter that the chill of the aura around his hand was freezing us together or burning at my skin as it spread out from the point of impact. All that mattered was that I had him.

With a flex of Artifice my sword leapt to my hand. I held it upright, the tip almost touching the cavern's roof, and took a steadying breath.

Koschei whimpered. "You can't."

But I could. And I did.

He twisted away from it, and flailed with all his might, so the first blow was clumsy, at an odd angle. It deflected from his face and clipped over his shoulder before going wide. His Vitality was so high that a single sword blow couldn't break his skin. That was fine. Like I said before, Faun bodies don't tire.

In a flurry of motion too fast for my eyes to follow he started pummeling me with his free hand. Each strike launching an icicle spike deep into my flesh, over and over. Chill spread through me, but the rage burning at my core never spluttered.

I hefted the sword again and slammed it right down on his shoulder this time. The skin parted beneath his robe and blood began to flow. Anyone else would have lost their arm to that first hit. Anyone else would have been lucky. They wouldn't have had to feel the second, third and fourth hits that it took to dig down through his millennia old flesh and slip that limb free of the torso in a gory spray.

The scent of blood filled my nose as I brought my sword up and down. Up and down. Methodical. Like a butcher at the block. Up and down. Up and down. Skin and robe. Blood and muscle. Gristle and bone.

Somewhere in the middle of my butchery he began to scream. Cursing me in every language of Amaranth. Shrieking in pain. Demanding I stop. Demanding the Faun come running to his rescue. We were too deep in the cave for anyone to hear.

I didn't have a magic ray gun or lightning bolts shooting out of eyes or brain molesting ghosts at my disposal. That wasn't the kind of Eternal that I was. All I had was my sword. So that was what I used.

With his arm off, there were no more counter-attacks. No more attempts to freeze me, or hit me or fight back at all. Koschei stared down at it lying in a pool of his blood like he couldn't believe this was happening. His voice was a mousey squeak. "What have you done?"

Most people lose an arm and that is the end of the fight, but not my boy Koschei. He had too much Vitality for grievous bodily harm to phase him. Too much of the nebulous "Health" for the fact that half of his torso was a raw open wound after my clumsy attacks to let him die.

So I did what I had to do to kill him. I kept on swinging.

To give the man credit, he kept on trying to pull away from me, even as I beat him and beat him. When one of his legs fell away at the hip, he still went on struggling, lifting the other one up to push against me. That made it even more awkward to whack him, and it finally gave him the leverage he needed to bring his full strength to bear against me. Down two limbs and he still bowed me over with a tug.

The frantic terror seemed to leave him the moment that he realized that he still had power. He was a real mess, but despite the chunks missing out of his face and his whole right side being fairly meatloaf-y at this point, his eyes narrowed as he worked out his next move.

I couldn't give him time to think. If it came down to thinking, I was going to lose.

Spirits started coiling around us again. He was going for another brain gouge. Well I wasn't giving him the opportunity. We'd been fighting down here for what felt like an hour, so I wasn't surprised to find my Pillar of Ascension glowing away at full power again. I surged my strength and for one wonderful moment I was strong enough to stand up straight despite him straining against me. I used that wonderful moment to spin on the spot and throw the little bastard as hard as I could.



Koschei spun end over end across the cave, twisting himself around so he could land limb side down and scuttle off like the weirdest crab you've ever seen. Not on my watch.

Blood fell in a splatter as my sword flowed out of its solid state and reformed in the same worm-hunting spear I'd carried worms back to town with earlier. It wasn't pretty or elegant, but it was solid in my hand as I drew back my arm and launched it after Koschei.

He saw it coming, of course he saw it coming, and he twisted again in the air to avoid it, but his maimed body was hideously off balance, and my surged Potency had it flying so fast that it took even me by surprise.

Ever seen a pinned butterfly? That was Koschei.

Blood bubbled out of his mouth with the latest scream. The spirits that had been called up wisped away into nothingness as he lost concentration. I had him.

Even with a spike through his chest, an arm and a leg missing, lumps of his flesh scattered across the floor and more blood sprayed about than I thought that his little body could ever have held, he still went on struggling. As for me? I was starting to feel every one of the injuries he'd inflicted on me. The icicles in my stomach had started to melt, and my own various fluids were running down, mixed with that water. I staggered as dizziness swept off me, and the jolt knocked one of the ice spikes right out of me. Wouldn't have thought that would hurt more than it going in to start with, but it did.

While I could use Restoration time and time again, I couldn't use it on myself again so soon. If I wanted to lay hands on Koschei and try to stitch him back into shape, the Pillar would allow it, but using it on the same person repeatedly was against the rules somehow. I'd have to wait it out a little longer. Feeling my own health score dripping lower and lower with every patter of gore on the floor.

I reminded myself that it didn't matter – that dying wasn't the end for me, the way I was going to make it the end for him – but it still felt bad. It hurt, and it felt like... dying. I'd already died too many times to want to experience it again. At least two times too many.

It felt like a marathon just walking over to the far wall with all my injuries, and through it all I could still see Koschei wriggling and twisting, trying to push himself away from the wall and along the spear so that he could get down and go on the offensive all over again. The spear was longer than his arm and his leg, so all he actually managed to do was push himself off the wall, at which point weight of his big head full of profound thoughts flipped him to dangle upside down.

He reached for the spear haft with his one remaining hand, and started pulling himself along, his hands so slippery with his own blood that he could barely get any traction.

The light of my eyes was dimming. I had to grab onto the end of the spear to keep my balance by the time I reached him, and I had to hold onto it to keep my balance as I kicked him in the head, sending him slithering back to hit the wall once more.

I spat out a mouthful of my own blood to mix with all of his. "You're tough. I'll give you that."

Koschei didn't deign to answer me. I was pretty sick of the sound of his voice by that point anyway. A twist of my wrist and a touch of Artifice snapped half the length off the spear, and I reformed it into a cleaver.

A hideous mewling sound filled the cave, echoing back and forth. Koschei grabbed for me, but I stepped around to the side with no arm and he couldn't spin himself around before I caught him by the top of his bald head and held him still for the last cut.

"Goodbye old man."

That would have been a killer one-liner before I chopped his head clean off. But reality wasn't that pretty. My first strike rebounded from what should have been soft tissue in his neck, hardened through all his years of advancement into something tougher than it had any right to be. So I had to chop at it again and again and again.

There was no sense of victory by the time that I was done. No sense of anything except disgust, as layer after layer of flesh was parted by my hacking. This was ugly work, but someone had to do it. I concentrated on my *Psychopomp* gift and I cut.

With a hollow thump, the head fell to the floor.

*New Skill Discovered! [Aether Resistance]*  
*New Skill Discovered! [Spirit Strike]*  
*New Skill Discovered! [Elemental Fist]*  
*New Skill Discovered! [Ascendant Cognition]*  
*Legendary Foe Defeated!*  
*Celerity increased to 22*  
*Piety increased to 8*  
*Polearm: Rank 2/10*  
*Aether Resistance: Rank 4/10*  
*430 Experience Gained*  
*7000 Glory Gained*  
*Tier of Glory Ascended!*  
*Tier of Glory Ascended!*

I followed after the dropped head. Flopping down beside what was left of Koschei with a groan that seemed to fill up the sudden silence. There was still some dripping as what was left of the old Eternal's blood drained from his hanging corpse but after the cacophony of violence that had been filling this place up for what felt like hours, it was positively soothing.

"Well... that sucked."

