

Chapter 1

Throughout the eons of human history, men have done a lot of really dumb things to get laid. When you put that into context, going for a ten-mile hike for a first date when you are as athletic as a cabbage probably doesn't even make the top ten. It is one of the dumbest things I'd ever done personally, but on the grand scale of things, it doesn't even register.

The forest that she took me to was actually pretty gorgeous—if you're into heavily wooded areas and bugs. The sun was filtering through the leaves, making the path beneath our feet green and golden in alternate patches. In the distance, I could hear a stream gurgling by. If I'd been an outdoorsy kind of person then this would probably be my idea of heaven. Since I was more of a stay inside and play video games until three in the morning kind of person, I was less than enthusiastic.

Needless to say, the actual date part wasn't going so well. It was pretty apparent I'd lied when I showed up to the hike in a T-shirt, jeans, and sneakers instead of whatever boots and beige explorer gear I was somehow meant to know I should be wearing. The fact that I was dripping with sweat and panting for breath after the first slight incline probably gave away the game a bit too.

Maybe I could have salvaged the situation, laid on some charm, and made it funny, but that panting thing was no joke. She was mad, and she was hiking up the path like she planned to stomp right through it.

"Hey..."

Every so often she stopped for me to play catch up, but by the time that I did, I was so out of breath I couldn't say anything.

"Uh..."

She stormed off again just before I got a word out, and I had no choice but to traipse on after her.

"So..."

There was a gentle breeze rustling through the trees as we continued to climb, yet I seemed to be burning up. Ever notice that you can't feel your lungs unless something has gone wrong? They don't ever feel pleasantly cool when you're just relaxing. It's only when you start putting some work in that they start to complain.

Which, in my case, made me feel like I'd been huffing napalm, leaving me looking like a partially boiled lobster. A lesser man might have just watched a nice butt wiggling up the trail ahead of him and accepted the day was a total bust, but I kept on going. Momma didn't raise a quitter after all. This was just going to be a funny story for our hypothetical grandkids someday. My perseverance in the face of adversity was sure to win her over any minute now. She'd respect me for carrying on even though I was completely out of my element, throw herself into my waiting arms, and kiss me until sundown. Then she would carry me back down to the car over her shoulder because my legs had turned into jelly.

The ground finally started to even out after we'd reached the seven-thousand-mile mark—also known as the top of the ridge that we'd been heading up. I never thought I could be so happy to see some dirt packed flat, but there I was. I was so overjoyed that I didn't even notice the path widening out into a clearing until I almost walked right into the back of my date.

I pulled up abruptly behind her, and in the moment before my brain caught up to what was going on, it fed me some weird little details. Some of the hair had finally wisped out of her ponytail, and she was standing really still like she was trying to not even breathe. There was even a bead of sweat running down the side of her neck, which I took as a win. Sure, I'd dripped out enough saltwater to fill a manatee enclosure, but she was sweating too, so this hiking thing was hard for everyone. It wasn't just me.

About then my eyes managed to focus on what had brought her to a dead halt. There was a wolf on the other side of the clearing.

Wolves are a lot bigger than you'd expect. That was the first thing I noticed. Next, I spotted the size of its teeth since it was snarling at us. It took a while to look away from those yellowed fangs and stop imagining just how much damage they could do. The fur along the length of it was thick and rich with a swirl of browns and greys. There was a smell hanging over the whole clearing—like a wet dog but acrid, sharp, and musky. The whole thing was surreal. I didn't even think there were any wolves in the wild around here, let alone frothing, growling, furious wolves that were bigger than me.

I wish I could say that some heroic instinct kicked in and I jumped forward to protect my date—maybe I would have, had I been given enough time for my exhausted brain to catch up—but the wolf didn't give us that chance. In one bounding step, it closed the distance, drool trailing from its jagged jaws.

Finally, my body decided to move, and I threw myself to the side, shoulder barging my date into the dirt and catching the wolf's jaws on my arm instead of her throat. Guess those hero instincts were in there somewhere, but I didn't have much time to be pleased because there was a wolf gnawing on my arm.

That was going to hurt really soon, but for that initial moment, all I felt was the heat inside his mouth. The wolf snarled at me, and I screamed right back at him. My date was scrambling back to her feet, but I had enough presence of mind to yell, "Run!" at her before the wolf started yanking on my arm like I was a rag doll.

She stood there staring at me for just long enough for me to think she wasn't going to listen, expressions washing over her face too fast to follow, then that good old-fashioned survival instinct kicked in, and she ran for her life back down the trail.

Good. That was one problem taken care of. Sure, I was about to become a snack, but at least the girl who'd spent all day aggressively ignoring me was going to be alright. The pain was coming now, nauseating waves of it every time I felt the teeth grinding on my bone. My screaming probably wasn't so defiant anymore. Nothing could have prepared me for the sensation of the bone cracking when the wolf got a good grip and really bit down.

I punched the wolf in the face. Then when it still didn't let go, I punched it again. I might have been twisted off balance and dragged halfway into the undergrowth before I realized I could fight back, but now I was ready. I was hurting, and I was angry, and this overgrown Chihuahua was not about to have me for dinner.

The next swing hit it right on the nose, and it let go of me with an undignified little yelp. We both jumped back from each other, then started to circle each other like it was a boxing match. I just wasn't sure I'd make it through another round.

We'd completely swapped places by the time it occurred to me that I could run for it too. Guess running never came naturally to me. When it came to fight or flight, I had always seemed to be missing the second part. I never wanted to give anyone the satisfaction of seeing me scared, even when it got me my ass kicked.

For once, it looked like fighting was the right choice. With the trail at its back, the wolf turned away from me, looking for easier lunch that wouldn't whack it with a rolled-up newspaper. The trail that my dearest darling date had just run down. Damn it.

I had one hand still working right, so when the wolf turned to run, I grabbed onto his brushy tail and pulled. That earned me another yelp and the undivided attention that I probably should have been doing my best to avoid.

The wolf spun on the spot, snapping at my wrist and catching a mouthful of tail instead. My throat was sore from all the panting and screaming, but I still managed to bluster out, "Too slow, bitch."

Maybe he understood English, or maybe he was just angry about biting itself on the tail, but either way, he came for me, and my jelly legs had no choice but to move where I told them to.

Even if I managed to get past him, I couldn't lead him towards my date, and I was pretty sure that a hungry wolf could outpace me on a flat surface even on the best of days—he was cheating, he had two extra legs—so the trail ahead was out too. That left only one other option.

I dove into the underbrush and made a run for it. If I could get a bit of distance and climb a tree, the wolf would be screwed. Of course, that would require me to move faster than a creature that was chasing me down through its natural habitat, when my natural habitat was the sofa seat closest to the bathroom so I wouldn't have to walk too far. I tripped over a root about ten seconds into my sprint and sprawled on my face.

The wolf obviously expected more from me, and he shot right by and had to make a U-turn to come back at my face—my face which now happened to be at a convenient chomping height. I had to fling myself to the side and swing a wild haymaker into the impending jaws of death just to keep the wolf from my throat.

It was like punching a furry brick wall. It turned the wolf's head so the bite missed, but that was it. The rest of the big hairy beast still rolled over me like a train. Flat on my back, looking up at the clear blue sky above me, I caught a glimpse of the moon. It wasn't meant to be here today. Neither was I. My ears were ringing. Maybe shock was kicking in.

The wolf darted in, faster than I could follow, and this time its teeth found my throat. With a bite strong enough to shatter bone, those teeth didn't need to be needle sharp to hurt me, but that was still the first thing I felt, before the wet and the heat and the pain; that first sharp touch on my skin before I jammed my hands in his mouth to keep the jaws from closing.

The wolf bit down anyway. No matter what I shoved in the way, it could still bite through, but instead of the rip and tear it had gone for, it got a mouth full of crunchy little hand bones that it had to try and grind through. It was like biting into a chicken wing wrong and feeling the bone splinter in your mouth.

Except in this scenario, I was the chicken wing in question.

With my hands busy being chewed to shreds and an angry wolf on top of me, the only thing I could do to get it off me was head-butt the mangy mutt right on its wet nose. With a strangled yelp, it jumped off, paws hammering me back into the scrubby plants all over again.

I rolled and was up and running before I had time to realize that pushing off with my hands was going to be an agonizingly bad idea. There was no time to stop and scream, so I did it while I ran, yodeling through the woods at top speed with the wolf literally snapping at my heels until my breath ran dry.

All that I could hear was the hammering of my heart, the whipping of leaves by my ears, and the wolf. Always the wolf. His ragged breath. The steady beat of his paws on the ground. The long growl that rumbled out of him as we ran.

Then one moment, just as abruptly as the wolf had appeared, he was gone. I staggered forward a few more steps before tripping over something and falling in a heap. I twisted, expecting the wolf to be on me again, but it was just standing there. Hackles up. Teeth bared. I shuffled my back up against what I'd assumed was a mossy tree. Its cool presence informed me it was actually a rock. There were eight of them, all covered in so much moss and lichen that you couldn't even see the color of the stone. They loomed in a circle that I'd just fallen into the middle of.

A circle that the wolf wouldn't, couldn't enter.

If I wasn't so grateful that I wasn't currently being treated like a dollar store chew toy it probably would have been unsettling. Outside the circle, the wolf bayed and barked, drooled and paced, but not once did it try to come inside. I'd beaten it. I'd won. I started to laugh, but it hurt too much. My hands were a mangled mess of gristle, blood, and bone, and reaching up to my neck with what was left of them, I found it was slick with gore too. The bite that I'd stopped short hadn't stopped short enough. My shirt was soaked in blood, and the sun in the open sky above the circle was getting dimmer by the second.

It took so much effort now just to look around. All the stuff I'd taken for granted was suddenly arduous. I knew that I was dying—I wasn't dumb. Nobody bled this much and survived. However, there was still one last thing I had to do before I died. My eyes locked on the wolf, still snarling on the other side of whatever invisible barrier was keeping it out. All that work and he wasn't even going to get a taste of my delicious man meat.

Straining with all my might, I lifted both of my arms and curled all but one finger on each hand as tightly as I could, grunting through the pain. I kept those middle fingers raised at that wolf for as long as I had the strength. Eventually, they started to wobble and drift as my eyes fluttered shut, and heavy darkness overtook me.

So that was what dying felt like. In case you wondered.

Chapter 2

Death is not the end.

I remember a lot of people worrying about that back when I was still alive, so I thought I'd clear it up. Everything went dark, then everything went light again, blindingly bright for just a moment, then I was hanging there above my body, looking down on it and wishing that I wasn't. It wasn't pretty. I mean, I wasn't much of a looker to start with, but the wolf had really done a number on me. Bits were dangling that were not meant to be dangling, and the whole thing just looked wet and gross. It made me glad I wasn't in the body anymore. There was no pain, and there was no fear—those were functions of the body I'd inhabited. Instead, there was just me.

Ghosts are also a thing as it turns out. I was dead but not gone. There aren't many things you can call that other than ghosts. Tearing my attention away from the meaty mess I used to occupy, I looked to the wolf, only to discover that he'd wandered off sometime between the darkness, the light, and my haunting beginning. I couldn't see any sign of it. Next, I found my attention drawn to the stones, which now seemed to glow faintly blue in the day's dying light. I already knew that there was something strange about them when the wolf wouldn't come in, but now I was wondering just what fresh hell I'd landed myself in. I was just starting to think that I could do with some sort of advice on what to do next when I saw a robed figure hanging in the air just beyond the circle's perimeter. I glanced quickly over the scythe and the anorexic hands that gripped it and found myself staring into the dark recesses of the hood, from which a voice echoed out, *"Your time in this world has ended. Come to me, and I shall take you on to the next."*

When capital "D" Death tells you to do something, obeying is almost automatic. I felt myself moving before I even had time to think. I'd nearly made it out of the circle before I realized something. Even Death couldn't come in here. "What happens if I don't?"

For a moment, the wraith froze in place, then, as soft as a sigh, Death said, *"Then you will linger here for all eternity. Forgetting more and more of what you were—doing nothing, changing nothing—until only your awareness remains. It is that fate which I labor to spare you all."*

Lingering for all eternity with nothing to do but look at these rocks did sound kind of dull, and it wasn't like I was going to get less dead by hanging out next to my corpse. So I tried to shrug, found I was missing the required shoulders, and drifted on over.

Death moved off between the trees almost as soon as I'd started to follow. Keeping up wasn't a problem now that I passed through everything like it wasn't there, but it was still kind of rude. Besides, I had a lot of questions. This was my first time being dead. "So what happens next?"

"You do not know? Most mortals are brimming over with opinions."

Every time I nearly caught up, he put on a new turn of speed. We must have been flying along at thirty miles an hour now. "I think I'd prefer to know what is actually coming instead of guesswork."

Death stopped dead, and I almost rammed into the back of him. *"Most mortals I reap pass into whatever world their actions have destined them for. You are different. Your circumstances necessitate intervention."*

Uh-oh. "What kind of 'intervention' are we talking about?"

"Divine."

I didn't like the sound of that either. I'd never been big on religion while I was alive, and now that I was dead, I didn't really want to change that. Every story I'd ever heard about a person getting some divine intervention usually ended up with someone on fire, in a whale, or having some internal organs becoming external. It was that last one that was concerning me right now. Sure I was dead, but that didn't mean I wanted some big alligator-looking dude weighing my organs to decide if I was a good enough guy to not be eaten by miscellaneous nightmare beasts.

Why did my mind go there? See where your mind goes when you drop dead.

In either case, I was just starting to reconsider the whole lingering for eternity bit when I realized we'd stopped for a reason. We were in the middle of nowhere now—even more the middle of nowhere than where we'd started out from. This place was as barren as a desert with none of the exciting sand dunes and scorpions. Just an endless blank expanse. Except for the golden gate that hung unsupported and open ahead of us. It wasn't a pearly gate with a neon sign flashing "Heaven ahead", but it looked promising enough. There were no screaming souls of the damned pouring out or anything. Maybe I had found the time to be a good person in between movie marathons and MMO raids?

Stepping through the auric arches, it was like someone had switched out the lights on the whole universe. The only reason I knew Death was walking by my side was that he hissed, *"Stay close. This is no place for spirits to be lost."*

I couldn't see anything, but I supposed that being insubstantial meant that I wouldn't be stubbing my toe or banging into anyone in the dark anyway. I felt myself moving, even if I couldn't see it, then in the distance, I began to make out a shimmer of golden light. From the refractions, the hall that we were moving through began to take shape.

It was huge. Impossibly huge. So big that no human hands could possibly have wrought it. If we had footsteps they wouldn't even have echoed in so wide a space. The marble was dark and seamless, with only a hint of distant stars buried somewhere deep down within it. There were no clear cuts or joints, no sign that the stone had been worked at all. It was as though the whole place had just sprung into being fully formed.

Hanging back really was a bad idea. Big D seemed to have no intention of slowing or even acknowledging me now that I was here. I guess I was just a work friend. I had to hurry after him or risk being left behind in the hollow darkness. Yet now that we were coming closer to the light, I realized that neither one of us was actually alone. There was a train of four wisps following in his wake, only visible now that they were coming into the light of whatever golden sun lay ahead of us. Were they more people like me, all requiring divine intervention to find their final resting place? Was that what I looked like? Just a little puff of light and substance hanging in the air? Was that all that was left of me?

That mental rabbit-hole would have to remain unexplored because I soon found myself distracted by the shiny. The hall had continued to open out into an even grander chamber, and standing at the center of it all was the source of all light in this place.

The gods.

Each one of them was bathed in radiance that made the brightest day back on Earth look like it was thick with fog, the colors in my memory appearing faded and mute in comparison. But even as bright as their aura was, it could not compare to the light that poured from their eyes. Looking into

them would have blinded me if I still had the anatomy for it. I was formless, impervious, and I still caught myself flinching.

While I could sense more gods watching from the wings, there was only a trio waiting for us at the center. The tallest and grandest wore a crown. He was more or less everything you'd expect from a god—towering, muscular, flowing white robes, and lots of gold filigree. He even had the big white beard, although it seemed that there were little embers glowing at the end of each wavy hair. In one hand, he held a spear that was even taller than him, in the other a golden sphere that glowed almost as brightly as his eyes. It could very well have been a small sun for all I knew about how the universe worked. Maybe stars were like handbag dogs for the gods?

Beside him, and back a step on either side, were the other two gods. On his left was the most beautiful woman I had ever seen—so picture-perfect that she didn't look real. Every line and curve of her face and body were porcelain pristine, accentuated, and masked in equal parts by the diaphanous, silky white gown that she wore. Here too was more gold. A circlet at her brow and filigreed details worked into her clothes. It was difficult to tear my eyes away from her to look at the third figure.

What this one lacked in height compared to the central god, they made up for in bulk. There was gold aplenty to be seen, but none of the white robes for this one. They were clad from head to toe in plate armor, shining blinding-bright in the light of the others and emitting their own solar glow from six holes in the helmet's faceplate. While you could have mistaken the middle god's spear for something decorative, this one had flails looped short in their hands that were clearly meant to be used, the spiked head of each hidden by the flames burning wildly within.

Death stopped before the gods without deference. Then he turned back to we mere mortals and pointed to the gods, each in turn. "*Eosphel, King of the Dawn. Hemeraphel, The Noon Queen. Bilaphel, The Purifying Flame. These gods rule the Solar Court. They shall have their pick of the four of you.*"

Hemeraphel's white mask of a face creased into a benevolent smile. A hand slipped from her trailing sleeves and beckoned us forward. I had automatically tried to do what Big D told me to because it was wired into my brain, but I wanted to obey the Noon Queen because it might please her. I wanted her to turn that smile on me. More than anything, I wanted her to choose me. To make me hers in whatever way this afterlife intervention allowed.

Only the surprisingly solid arm of Death stretched across my path brought me to a halt. "*Not you.*"

Before I had the opportunity to object, Eosphel raised the golden sphere above his head, and his booming voice rolled over us all. "Behold Amaranth."

The little sun went supernova, exploding out to envelop the entire room in flames and light. It was only once we were inside the corona that I could see again, and there, hanging above Eosphel's hand, was a world. It was detailed in the same golden glow that poured out from the gods, but it was still clearly a little planet that we were looking at, and as we gawked, it grew larger and larger until we were drifting across its surface as it rotated.

"Look upon Amaranth, first of all worlds. The world of which all others are mere shadows. It is the holy land where the great matters of the Courts are settled."

It took a little time to understand what I was looking at. The little image of a world was spinning by so fast, and we were so high above it that making out details would have been a struggle anyway. The fact that everything was being displayed in the same golden color really didn't help much. There were mountains and rivers, forests, and plains. It looked a lot like Earth used to be before we built all over it. There seemed to be a few deserts in unexpected spots, but beyond that, it didn't seem like anything special.

“When there is order in Amaranth, there is order throughout the cosmos. When there is chaos here, all worlds fall to it. Amaranth is key to mastery of the universe.”

We dipped in closer to the surface now, and the illusion that this world was wild and empty washed away. There had been buildings, even cities, once upon a time, but they had since fallen into ruin. Colossal statues were hidden beneath the grime of ages, long broken and forgotten. Everywhere I looked, the world had grown back on top of what people had tried to build there. Layer upon layer of civilizations laid down in strata to support this latest wilderness.

“That mastery is the very reason that there are strict rules that govern conduct upon Amaranth. Gods of neither court may walk upon it. Nay, all of our great works there must be done through our agents, the Eternals.”

The world stopped spinning.

We stood on the crest of a hill, overlooking a vast battlefield. Down amidst a confusing sea of swarming creatures, a single man in armor stood tall and unmoved. He was no bigger than the host buzzing around him, but he filled up our sight all the same, the only real looking thing in the glowing illusions laid out before us. Yet even he didn't escape the divine light entirely, and when he turned our way, we could see it blazing in his eyes—just the same as it did in the eyes of the gods.

“This is the fate that we offer unto you lost souls. Harken to us and be born again into a living world. Be granted bodies once more that not just match those that you bore in your previous lives, but are better in every way. Bodies that are empowered with our divine might, so that you can bring order to the world of Amaranth. You have all felt the icy touch of oblivion upon you, but you need not feel it ever again. In exchange for your servitude, each of you shall be granted the most glorious boons. Not the least of which is life everlasting.”

I don't know what I did to win this jackpot prize, but I wasn't going to let it pass me by. “I get to be a badass warrior for all eternity? Where do I sign up?”

Eosphel fell silent at my interruption, and I had a horrible flashback to a timeshare pitch that I'd once been tricked into sitting through with the promise of a free brunch. The brunch hadn't even been that good. The gentle golden light that the king was wreathed in flared to life like somebody poured gasoline on him. I was getting the distinct impression that gods weren't used to being interrupted.

The flare lasted for just a moment, then he seemed to get it back under control and press on with the sales pitch as if I weren't there. Probably a good thing, all things considered.

“The four of you have been chosen by the fates. Your deaths were not wasted as so many are but instead were sanctified. Each of you passed from your mortal forms on holy ground. Know now that even the manner of your death needed to be righteous for you to be ushered into these halls. Even in this, there are strictures and limitations to ensure that only the truly worthy are called.”

That explained why the place wasn't packed. A lot of people died all day every day throughout the world, but how many did so in weird stone circles in the middle of nowhere? Five in a day seemed about right.

Wait, there were five of us newly dead here, weren't there?

Eosphel was still blabbing on about divine providence and the virtues of service, so I took a second to do a recount. There was Big D, me, the gods, and four other glowing wisps. Five dead people in total. If the gods couldn't do basic arithmetic that also explained a lot about the universe.

I tuned back into Eosphel's grand proclamations just in time for some of the juicy details. "Within Amaranth, you too shall be bound by the strictures of the concord we reached with the other Court but empowered by them too. Your world was tainted thoroughly by chaos. So much so you could not even perceive the fundamental nature of your own selves. In Amaranth, you shall truly know the new self that we here shall forge. All shall be revealed to you. The very sacred geometry of the cosmos laid bare."

The big golden display shuddered and shifted, and suddenly, we were surrounded by a circle of people standing to attention and drifting in a slow orbit. There were a pair of good old-fashioned humans amongst them, but they were an afterthought compared to the cornucopia of fantastical other races that had just appeared. There were lizard people, dwarves, elves, and then some hulking horny beast that towered over the rest. We weren't just coming back from the dead, we were going to fantasy land. I just wished I had a mouth so I could grin.

Sure, dying sucked, but if you gave me the choice of anywhere to go when I died, then this would have been it. Keep your hundred virgins and your magic sherbet, I'll take dungeons and dragons any time.

"Amaranth was the first world of the cosmos, and the echoes of its people find their way into the dreams of all other worlds. You may know these creatures as myths, but they are more real than the shadow creatures that you once lived as. To be reborn, we shall name you and shape your spirits in their form. Look upon them now and choose your future."

All the other wisps darted around taking in the sights, but once again, Death held out his arm to keep me back. I was getting really tired of that, so I darted out of reach to join the tour. What was he going to do, kill me?

I decided to get the boring ones out of the way first. Humans. Just looking at the glowing construct was enough to set off the booming voice of Eosphel in my head.

"Mankind is the youngest people of Amaranth, born into the world during the Revelation of Araphel. Though lost and confused, they swiftly took up the banner of righteousness and joined the war against the Void God, making many see them as the saviors of all free folk."

Oh, my gods...

"Despite their natural disadvantages compared to the other races, they have become more numerous and prosperous than any other."

This was...

"Though they have none of the other races' unique abilities, they have the adaptability to excel in any..."

So... boring.

Why wasn't there an option to skip the fluff? Show me the stats. Damn it. Give me the delicious crunchy numbers. I concentrated on the weird symbols hanging beside the human's display, and the god of no-inside-voice cut out. Thankfully.

Race: Human

Starting Attributes:

Potency: 10

Celerity: 10

Vitality: 10

Piety: 10

Starting stats. When they were talking about Amaranth being bound by rules, they meant game rules. Whatever game the gods were playing on Amaranth, it was a crunchy-stat based one.

Beneath the stats, another little row of symbols appeared.

Racial Ability:

Curiosity:

Filled with a curious and cunning spirit, there is little a human cannot discover or learn if given enough time.

Effect: *Humans gain an extra rank when unlocking a skill for the first time and gain additional experience across all skills.*

Yawn. Generic humans were generic. Come on game designers, humans are so many weird and wonderful things, why did we always get such dull racial abilities. Come on! We could heal from almost anything. Why didn't we get regeneration? We could make friends with wolves and wildcats. Why didn't we get animal handling? Humans were the weirdest animal on Planet Earth, and somehow, when the time came to make games about us, everyone came up with "oh they can learn stuff." At least it wasn't a flat experience boost.

Dwarves were up next—at least they were liable to be a bit more interesting. "The Dvergar were once known as the Godseekers. The Dvergar had no gods of their own. While the other races lived on the surface in clear view of the sun and moon, they dwelled beneath the earth, yearning for the same care that the heavens granted their terranean kin. In their desperation, they delved deeper and deeper beneath the surface of Amaranth, answering the siren call of the beast below."

Dwarves that delved too deep. What a shocking twist. At least this beast below was a bit more exciting.

"Darkness made flesh, he seemed the perfect god for those who dwelled forever beneath the stone. They fell at Araphel's feet. Yet Araphel's hunger for conquest was not sated by mere Dvergar. His designs were upon all of creation. His worshipers became his slaves, toiling in the Flesh Forges to create abominations for his all-conquering army."

So the dwarves were the bad guys in this world. That was actually a bit of a twist.

"Amaranth was consumed by war. Civilization was ground to dust. Though oathbound to Araphel, in the dying days of the Revelation, the Dvergar turned on him, yet even with their waning power added to the armies of the Free Folk, they were no match for Araphel's divine power."

At least that explained the state of Amaranth when we did our slow pan over it. The whole place got dark lorded all over.

“When the Revelation ended, the Dvergar were a ruined people—ashamed in equal measure for the doom that they had unleashed on the world and for the oaths that they broke to halt that doom. They retreated to their mountain holds, bitter solitude, and inevitable decline.”

Well, that was just a barrel of laughs. I was about to move on in search of a more upbeat storyline when the same little symbols formed in the air between the male and female-looking Dvergar. Symbols that I could now, somehow, read.

Race: *Dvergar*

Starting Attributes:

Potency: 11

Celerity: 5

Vitality: 18

Piety: 6

Racial Ability:

Toughness:

Made of sterner stuff than mere flesh, the Dvergar are resilient to the point of inflexibility.

Effect: *Dvergar have a natural armor value equal to half of their Vitality score. This is cumulative with other armor.*

And a rapid swerve back into boring territory. If I wanted to spend eternity being an immovable object then maybe that would be tempting, although I'd probably just cut out the middle man and reincarnate as a rock instead. I'd had enough boredom and drudgery in my first lifetime. This was my afterlife, and I was going to have a good time.

Next up, the clock struck elf-o'clock.

“Most beloved of the Solar Court, the Alvaren were masters of the Arcane. Devoted to defending their world from chaos, they were often defined by their opposition. When first they arose in Amaranth, they fought the Wyrms to a standstill. During the Revelation, they were the first to take up arms against the Void God and his evils, leading the Free Folk to many of their victories against him.”

The defenders of the universe schtick was appealing, but the magic thing didn't really tick any boxes for me. Standing far away from things I didn't like and muttering at them aggressively was how I'd wasted my first life.

“Through the early millennia, the Alvaren dwelled within the forests of Amaranth, but by the time of the revelation, their civilization had crystallized into city-states, differentiated from those settlements of others not only by their size and complexity but also by their mobility. Each great castle floated amidst the clouds in the sky, traveling to where its rulers directed, giving them a commanding tactical position from which their war-hawks took flight.”

Flying mounts changed things up in the Alvaren's favor. I'd played enough MMOs in my time to know how much running around was involved. Sure I had eternity, but that didn't mean I wanted to be hiking for all eternity. After the day I'd had, I wasn't sure I could think of a worse fate.

"Yet as the greatest of his enemies, it seems that the Alvaren suffered the worst of Araphel's death curse. Others may have been laid low by the backlash of the Void God's own destruction, but the Alvaren and all of their cities vanished without a trace. For an Eternal to choose their form is to remind Amaranth of a bygone age of glory but also the sorrow of the world's greatest loss."

So they went extinct, which meant all that handy infrastructure had probably vanished right along with them. Great. Real handy.

Race: *Alvaren*

Starting Attributes:

Potency: 8

Celerity: 12

Vitality: 8

Piety: 12

Racial Ability:

Grace:

To the Alvaren, mind and body are one. Thought becomes movement. Movement becomes art.

Effect: *Alvaren have a movement speed double that normally provided by their Celerity score.*

Running fast. Great. Love running. Live for running. The Alvaren would do as a fallback option if nothing else looked appealing, but they weren't at the top of my list.

Next up were the lizard people, which I was leaning towards before I'd even started. I've always kind of liked lizards anyway, and if I didn't have to be human anymore, I wasn't sure why I'd want to be one of the sort of the almost-human-but-not-quite Dvergar or Alvaren.

"Slaves to the Wyrms, the Inyoka are bound to the cause of chaos by the same yoke. As a race, they were bred from beasts to sentience in abject servitude. Outside of the secluded domains of the Wyrms, the Inyoka are rarely seen, and when they are spotted it is by misstep. They travel only to spread their master's byzantine plans behind the scenes. They rule nowhere yet are the power behind many thrones."

Damn it all. I wanted to go on fun-filled lizard adventures, and this world was giving me nothing but suspicion, slavery, and spies.

"The Inyoka served as meat for the grinder in the Wurm's long war against the Alvaren and likely would have continued to be mass-produced if so many of the swamps where they were spawned had not been purged by arcane fire. By the time of the Revelation, the Inyoka's numbers had dwindled until they could field no army at all, with all of their race devoted exclusively to the physical care of their overlords."

More slavery and misery. I suppose that if I was a better person, I might have made myself into an Inyoka and fought back against their wyrm-riddled oppression, but just the thought of everyone assuming I was lying and sneaking around all the time was exhausting. I was not good at lying. As the lead up to my untimely death had demonstrated. I didn't like lying, I didn't like liars, and I wasn't entirely convinced that my brain was wired right to keep track of a whole pack of lies all at once.

Don't ask me if your ass looks fat in that outfit unless you want to know the truth. Even when I do manage to bumble out a lie, without fail, it blows up in my face a few minutes later.

Race: *Inyoka*

Starting Attributes:

Potency: 7

Celerity: 14

Vitality: 9

Piety: 10

Racial Ability:

Regeneration:

Blessed with an unmatched healing ability, an Inyoka can recover from the deadliest of wounds and afflictions in short order.

Effect: *Inyoka naturally regenerate health at a rate equal to their vitality score every minute.*

I'd heard enough about that one. Sure, none of the other races could heal naturally without intervention, but that just meant that the world had to be chock-full of doctors, healing potions, magic ponds, and all that jazz. On to the big horny boys.

"The Chagnar Faun, firstborn of Amaranth, are hunters at heart. From the first moonrise, they swore themselves to chaos and lived as little more than beasts, reveling in bloodshed and slaughter. Yet for all of their much-vaunted martial prowess and strength surpassing all other races, they have still been bound to the will of their betters time and time again. Serving first as menial laborers for the Alvaren Empire, before betraying their masters to fight as the vanguard of Araphel. Humans, Alvaren, Dvergar, and even the Wyrms themselves eventually fought back against the Void God's horde, but never the wicked Faun."

I was wrong. The Dvergar weren't the bad guys. These were the bad guys. Yet something about the way that Eosphel had told the story had rubbed me the wrong way. When it was the Wyrms lording it over the Inyoka it got called slavery, but when it was the Solar Court's favorite pointy-eared darlings, suddenly it became "menial laborers."

I truly cannot stand a lie.

"After the revelation, with their new god defeated and their promised reign of destruction reduced to naught but a dream, the Faun found themselves outcast once more, offered not even the meager comforts of servitude to the other races. They became the horrors of bedtime tales and the creatures of nightmare; cannibalistic beast-men intent on consuming all ill-behaved children."

It sounded less like the Chagnar Faun—the proud warrior race I'd been looking for—were evil, and more like they'd been given a chance to escape eternal servitude under the Alvaren and put all their money on the wrong horse. If anything, I had more respect for these guys than I did the Dvergar. Even the Dvergar themselves admitted that they were ashamed that they broke their oaths to this evil god Araphel. Yet the Faun, who kept their promises, were treated like monsters for it?

"In the wild places of the world where they still dwell, perhaps these legends of savagery hold true, but the reality of the Faun rarely holds up to the tales when they come down from their feral realms. Still, they can find a place in the civilized world as mercenaries and thugs for hire. A kindness that they have not earned, and treatment far better than loyal servants of the adversary deserve."

Race: *Chagnar Faun*

Starting Attributes:

Potency: 18

Celerity: 7

Vitality: 11

Piety: 4

Racial Ability:

Relentless:

The Faun are the greatest hunters on Amaranth, known for pursuing prey for days or even weeks at a time before closing in to strike.

Effect: *Faun are immune to fatigue—their Attributes do not degrade over time without rest.*

So they were strong as hell and built for head butting wolves. Exactly what I wanted out of my second life. It sounded like a lot of people wouldn't like me if I was a Faun, but on the other hand, it sounded like they were the kind of people I didn't want to associate with anyway.

This was a big decision if I was going to be one of these things for the rest of my life. I drifted back a little to look at the Chagnar Faun in all their glory. Both of the example Faun stood at about seven-foot-tall, and that was with the natural forward hunch of their shoulders. Their bodies were so broad-shouldered and thickly muscled it was hard to tell which was meant to be the male and which was the female, though I guessed that the one wearing a top was probably the lady. Maybe they didn't even have genders. I wasn't going to go lifting any loincloths to find out.

I couldn't make out much coloration in this glowing display, but the details of their faces came through clear enough. A thick head of hair flowed back from behind the thick ridge of their brow, and great dark ram's horns curled back around their ears on either side. Like all of the previous races, this particular Faun was movie-star pretty. Intense stare... broad jaw... this was a face I could learn to love.

I turned to Eosphel before I could second guess myself, "Hey, Dawn King, I've chosen my new body."

Once again Eosphel seemed to seethe at the sound of my voice, turning so slowly to glower at me that I wondered for a moment if he'd even heard me speak.

I thought that his voice had been loud and annoying before, but now it felt like someone had turned him up to eleven.

He roared, "You are not worthy!"

Chapter 3

You aren't worthy. Any of the other wisps might have been shaking in their incorporeal boots when they heard that, but for me, it was almost a relief. I already suspected that I'd been brought along by accident, and this just confirmed it. Whatever special hoops a person had to jump through to get reincarnated as an awesome divine warrior in a fantasy world, I was pretty sure that getting gnawed on by an angry dog and falling down in the wrong place wasn't it. Death crossed the room in the blink of an eye, positioning himself between me and the glowing golden gods with sleeves outstretched. *"This one is not for you."*

That was enough to draw a little huff of surprise out of everyone, even the gods themselves. What was I here for if it wasn't for this?

Eosphel looked confused, and Bilaphel looked menacing, more so than usual. The only one that seemed to comprehend what was going on was Hemeraphel. She'd brought a delicate hand up to her perfect lips to hide a gasp. *"It cannot be. The Lunar Court has not had a champion in..."*

Death cut her off. Cutting people off mid-sentence was his specialty, after all. *"Three thousand six hundred and forty years. Time has no meaning. This one died on moon-hallowed ground. Marked by a beast."*

The silence stretched on and on. If these gods were the Solar Court, did that mean that the Lunar Court that I was heading for was the opposition? I was already planning to be a Faun, at least in part, out of spite towards the Solar Court being dicks. If I was allowed to play for the other team then that sounded more than fair. I looked around the shadowed periphery of the chambers for the gorgeous moon maidens and silver knights I was expecting and was rewarded with something else entirely. There was a shimmer of light coming towards me, eye-shine from the approaching gods, but the one leading them in had far too many eyes. I could count eight of them in all, clustered together and blazing with the pale light of the moon.

A spider as big as all the other gods combined scuttled into the chamber, every chitinous leg making a clatter like high heels on the marble. The wisps and gods all reared back from this monstrosity in horror, but not Death. I suppose he had nothing to fear. It wasn't like he had any insides to be turned into meat soup for a giant bug.

"Baal Gharron, The Weaver that Binds."

I was frozen in place, not out of arachnophobia, although holy crap that was a big spider, but because I'd just realized this was the side I was signing up with. Something else slithered in from the shadows, long and serpentine, almost invisible outside of the Solar Court's glow apart from the tell-tale shimmer of scales.

"Losna, The Conqueror Wyrm."

That thing was a straight-up dragon. It might not have had any wings on display, and it may have been weirdly elongated and snake-like, but there was no questioning that there was smoke trickling out of its mouth.

I was waiting for the next one to come out and complete the trinity of big scary monsters to balance out the shiny happy Solar Gods in the middle of the room, but whatever was out there in

the shadows just went on lurking. I got the odd glimpse of eye-shine, just to let me know that *something* was out there, but I had no real idea of its size or form.

The spider seemed to be the spokesperson for the Lunar Court. She was the sociable one. Figures. “This one is ours. Ours. We claim him. It is our right. Loathe us. Revile us. We are gods all the same. Our rights are the same. He is ours.”

Her voice was as rich as chocolate despite the undercurrent of anger. Deep but profoundly feminine. Like some sort of jazz club singer. Seductive and smoky. I had to remind myself that same voice was coming out of the giant bug that had scuttled over to peer at me like I was the last fly at the buffet. In the light, her chitinous hide shimmered like an oil slick.

Despite appearances, Baal Gharron seemed to be fairly reasonable. Unlike Losna, who’d reared up beside us and started to bellow. “Shred your flesh. Make you scream. Make you bleed. Beg for death.”

I didn’t have time to unpack all that, and it seemed like the rest of the gods were used to the crazy threats because they just ignored the dragon god entirely. Bilaphel rattled the chains of his morning-stars a little, but the others acted like Baal Gharron was the only one in the room. Hemeraphel stepped out between the two sets of gods with her hands held up placatingly. “This matter can be settled with words. There is no need for such accusations.”

It was only when I caught myself staring at her hands and thinking about how elegant her fingers looked that I realized there was something strange going on in my response to her. She was messing with my mind. Almost involuntarily I drifted back, closer to the spider’s embrace. Baal Gharron seemed pleased. “Of course, my lovely. My sweetness. I am sure it was just an accident that you were trying to poach our first Eternal in millennia. An accident.”

Eosphel scoffed, “You think that we want that bitter little soul?”

Rude. Baal Gharron pressed on seamlessly, legs edging forward to surround me in a tall, crooked fence of safety. “Then it is settled. This Eternal is ours. Settled, my sweetness.”

I got the impression that this argument wasn’t really over, but they didn’t want to keep it going when they had guests. So, like all squabbling families, they pretended that the offending party didn’t exist.

Eosphel turned back to his own flickering wisps and started taking their orders for custom-made bodies, and the looming monster clucked over me like a mother hen. “All that they have told you is a lie. Lies. History is written by the victors, and for oh so long the Solar Court has ruled over Amaranth. When first the terms of engagement were agreed, all was equal, but the longer that the Solar Court’s stagnation set in, the fewer of your kind came to us. Rare treat, my sweet.”

This close, the giant spider face was somehow even more terrifying, but it was still the only friendly face around, so I tried to stay upbeat. “Well, I’m here now.”

“You are here, but we have precious little time to share the truth with you. Truth. Your coming was hidden from us.”

In the center of the room, the first of the Solar Eternals was already being consumed in a pillar of golden sunlight, the distant silhouette of a body gradually taking form within. Baal Gharron pressed on, all her many eyes fixed on that shadow. “Know only this, whatever the Solar Eternals seek to achieve, it is your duty to stop it. Stop them. The Solar Court means to paralyze all of existence in

their hunt for perfection. Chaos is the only remedy. You must bring that chaos. You must break down the walls they have built. You must set Amaranth free. Chaos, my sweetness.”

“No pressure then?”

Suddenly Losna was there, weaving through the spider’s legs and snarling. “Mock your gods? Kill you! Rend your soul. Make you dust.”

Up close, the serpent had a hell of a lot of teeth. Whiskers too, like a catfish. In normal circumstances, I probably would have freaked out at that thing snapping an inch from me, but my weirdness meter had been so overloaded that this didn’t even seem to register.

Baal Gharron seemed oddly pleased with me, her mandibles rubbing together in delight as she said, “You have seen the races of Amaranth and heard the lies that the Solar Court spin about them. Have you chosen a form? A fleshy form, my sweetness?”

“I want to be a Faun. Definitely. I never want to be too weak to stand up for myself ever again.”

She let out a soothing rumble that I realized was a laugh. “A wise choice. The Chagnar were the first race of Amaranth, living joyfully in anarchy. Joy, sweetness. They were the first to worship us, and they remain our most devoted. You really were meant for us, little one.”

From amidst the pillar of light, the first of the Solar Eternals emerged, tall, lithe, and beautiful. She was an Alvaren with straight jet-black hair long enough to flow down and hide her nakedness. Guess somebody fell for the sales pitch on that one—hook, line, and sinker. Her skin was so white that she looked ethereal, even here amongst literal ghosts. The next wisp zipped past her bare figure and plunged into the pillar of light without hesitation. No body, no hormones, no ogling. That was interesting.

Still, I wasn’t quite ready to take the plunge back into the world of flesh just yet. “Okay, I get that we’re tight for time here, but can you two give me a quick uh... tutorial for this whole Eternal thing?”

Losna was still close enough that his brimstone breath was fluttering the flames of my spirit. “Enough questions. Make flesh. Bind spirit. Slay foes. Please Patron. Earn Glory.”

I drifted away from the crazy dragon until I was brushing against Baal Gharron’s closest leg. Weird to think of a giant spider as soothing, but any port in a storm, right. “You shall speak in tongues so that all may know your words, sweetness. You shall know the touch of death, but only for a moment before you are reborn beneath the earth of Amaranth. Once a shrine has been built in your honor, you shall return there, but until then, all of the world is your grave and the soil from which you shall spring renewed. Flesh and blood and bone, alive.”

Better build a shrine fast if I didn’t want to end up doing the grand tour of the whole planet. “Okay, so I respawn. Does that cost anything?”

Like an encouraging kindergarten teacher, the giant spider bobbed her head along as I spoke. “All of your Glory shall pass from you with each death, sweetness, a bounty for your slayer. Wealth and plunder shall pass from you also. Physical possessions shall remain where your corpse has faded.”

The second Eternal emerged from the pillar of sun-fire. A Dvergar. Half the height of the Alvaren girl but twice as broad. His skin was a rich chestnut brown, his beard not quite long enough to hide his dangling Dvergar-hood. I was stuck staring for a moment before I jogged my mouth back into action. “Glory?”

“When you are made an Eternal, we are not only granting a fraction of our power, we are setting you on the path to godhood. When your deeds echo throughout Amaranth, Glory is the reward, sweetness. Through crystalizing your Glory, the Pillars of Divinity are empowered, and you ascend.”

And I don't lose Pillars when I die, just unspent glory. I was pretty sure I'd played a game like that before. The gamble of spending your experience fast instead of saving up for something better. “So I get my god powers by spending glory?”

“You ascend through the Tiers of Glory and the Pillars of Divinity, but your “god powers,” as you call them, are skills. Skills that mortals could never achieve, sweetness.”

Another mechanic to learn. “So there are skills too?”

Losna was inching closer and closer to me the longer we spoke, a glow building in his throat. I didn't want to be here when it came out. I didn't think that I could die right now, what with me already being dead, but I was fairly confident that dragon fire wasn't going to do anything good to me.

Baal Gharron was keeping up that ignorance is bliss act, ignoring the serpent in our midst, dribbling venom to sizzle on the floor. “All that live can improve their skills with practice and develop new ones by investing the experience that they have earned into knowledge, sweetness. You shall outlast them all, so you are limitless.”

I tried to move farther from the Wyrms, but I found that the comforting interlock of legs behind me also served as a cage. I was trapped in here with the dragon, trying to maintain focus. “Experience and glory are different things?”

Losna was growling so loud I had to strain to hear Baal Gharron's answer. “Mortals can learn and grow, but Glory comes only unto the divine. Divine like you, sweetness.”

Okay, Skills, Experience, Glory, Pillars. I'd played much more confusing games than this before. “What about the stats—the Potency and Celerity and? ...”

The spider's great fangs snapped forward and latched onto Losna's neck. The serpentine body bucked and flailed, but everywhere it had coiled around the spider's legs it now found itself trapped. She gave one firm shake, then dropped the dragon god to the ground where it lay limp and seething. “As your skills improve and evolve, so in harmony shall your attributes grow, sweetness. In this, mortals are limited in what they can achieve, Eternals are not. You are boundless, my sweetness.”

Writhe as it might, the wyrm did not rear up again, lying before the spider goddess in a display of submission, but it did hiss. “Time through. Flesh now.”

The insane dragon god had a point. The last of the Solar Eternals was being stitched together as we spoke, and I didn't want to miss the last bus to Amaranth. “Okay, I'm ready. Let's do this. Do I get to choose what I look like or is it—”

Baal Gharron interrupted me. “We shall weave flesh to best suit your spirit and bind it with a name, my sweetness. You shall be mighty, and fearsome, and ours. Ours. Your skin shall be the grey of long shadows, and your eyes shall burn with the moon's fire.”

“Is that optional because if I could go incognito sometimes it might be—”

This time I was cut off by the sudden blinding light surrounding me—so bright I could see nothing beyond it. So bright that I felt like it was tearing what little was left of my soul apart. Who I had been

was gone. What I was going to be came scorching out of the light. Everything that made me *me* remained, but everything else seared away. My old name was the last piece of me to be burned away. It was the capstone on the complete destruction of what I was before, and the deepest hole in the foundation of what I would now become.

The light faded, and I was left looking down into Baal Gharron's face. Giant as she was, I was level with her now. I reached up with my new, thick fingers and touched the blackened tips of the horns I could just barely make out at the periphery of my vision. When I brushed them with my finger, I could feel them stretching all the way up to my skull where they were rooted. That was going to take some getting used to. I drew in my first breath with my new lungs and tasted the vanilla and acrid venom in the air.

Muscles rippled beneath my skin—more than I'd ever had in my last life, and more than any bodybuilder I could remember seeing either. My skin was grey, but it shimmered with an almost metallic hint. Not grey like a dead thing, but grey like a mineral. Like I was a mountain that could move. A force of nature. My new voice was much deeper, not gravelly but resonant, like the pounding of a war-drum. I reached out and cupped the spider-god's mandible-clacking face between my hands. "Thank you."

Baal Gharron seemed startled, jerking her face out of my grasp. Maybe touching gods was frowned upon. Maybe I was about to get smote. Smitten? But when she bashfully replied, "You are welcome, my sweetness," while brushing at her face with a forelimb. I realized that if spiders could blush, she would have been pink.

Now I had flesh again, I could feel the heat radiating out of Losna's face. It was like being next to an open blast furnace. Now I had a body again, I had all the glands I needed to feel properly intimidated by the dragon and properly worried about searing my eyebrows off, assuming I'd grown some. Another thing to check out later. A glance down revealed plentiful wiry black body hair, so hair wasn't off the agenda completely.

Losna's interest in me seemed to have switched now that I had a body, and their eyes raked up and down me with something like hunger. I caught myself trying to cover my nether regions with my hands. The wyrm barked. "Patron now. He must choose. Must choose me. Look at him. Built for slaughter. Blood and war. Mine. Mine."

Once more Baal Gharron tried to fend her compatriot away from me so that the grown-ups could speak. "Each of us is a god of chaos, my sweetness, a god of the wild and the moon. Yet each of us governs a different aspect of chaos."

Losna went on barking behind her legs. "Mine! Mine!"

The spider did not sigh, but it seemed to be a struggle. "Losna is the god of war. To accept his patronage means your greatest victories will be won on the battlefield. His gifts will make you stronger, faster, and more skilled with the blade and the bow the more Glory you bring to him."

That sounded good, but I wasn't sure I wanted to be beholden to a deranged lizard for all of eternity. "What about you?"

"Me? My sweetness? I am the one that the Solar Court hates the most because I am the one whose power commands them most frequently. I am the ties that bind all living things. The bondage that cannot be escaped and obeys no logic. I am their love and their hate and their passion above all else. Passion, my sweetness. The one thing that no demand for order can crush."

So my only options were snakey-fights-a-lot or an eternity of whips and chains. At least this new body could pull off an all-leather outfit.

Baal Gharron pressed on without a breath. “My patronage gives you influence over those you meet. You will change minds with words, with thoughts, with just a look, my sweetness. You shall inflame passions. Turn foes into friends. Rule over others by the strength of your heart. Your heart.”

Heart power. Great. Just what I wanted when I got this bad-ass warrior body.

“There is another choice.”

That sounded like the voice of Death again, but that particular spooky scary skeleton seemed to have vanished somewhere in the middle of my reincarnation. Maybe all that life being created offended him. Or maybe I just couldn’t see him now that I had a body again. I didn’t even have a chance to thank him. How much are you meant to tip your reaper?

Losna and Baal Gharron had fallen silent. As had all the other gods and Eternals. Silence echoed through the halls, broken only by the soft padding of leathery feet somewhere off in the deep shadows. *“There are three great gods of the moon. Not two.”*

That voice. It was coming closer. Each step setting the ground trembling. Each breath rumbling with a growl. A smell swept through the halls ahead of the coming of the god—a smell rich and earthy, sharp with pine sap. The forest seemed to flow into the spaces between the marble walls, filling everywhere with the scent of the wild. I opened my mouth to make a dumb-ass remark and realized that I didn’t have any to make.

The wolf opened its eyes, and the moon shone out, blinding bright. Baal Gharron and Losna were dwarfed in the shadow of this looming darkness. My new body barely came up to this god’s shaggy chin.

“I am Chernghast, The Wolf that Waits. I am the inevitable.”

The stare, the voice, it all paralyzed me, pinning me in place as the wolf stalked ever closer. Chernghast was still almost invisible in the darkness. Only the hint of white when his eyes or his razor-sharp teeth shone out betrayed his approach.

“When you decide, I shall be your patron. You shall have powers unmatched. Known as mercy to some and dread to others. You shall stalk Amaranth in my place. You shall be death, you shall grow strong on the taste of it, and death shall follow with you.”

He was close enough now that I could see him clearly. Baal Gharron had scuttled off, and Losna had slunk away like a worm. I didn’t even see them go; I couldn’t turn away. Even the glow of the Solar Court gods had dimmed in Chernghast’s presence. He was the wolf that all other wolves were based on, the one that they all dreamed that they would be when they grew up. His body was muscled and sleek beneath a coat as black as night. I could barely even think when he was this close. Terror vying with some other emotion that I’d only briefly brushed against in my past life. Awe.

I was nodding my head. What this guy had was what I wanted. Power radiated off him. Enough to silence even the Solar blowhards with nothing but his presence. *“You must say the words. You must ask me to take you.”*

My mouth was dry and my lungs quivering, but I managed to wheeze out the words he asked for. “Be my patron. Please. I want you to. I...I need you to.”

Those big white eyes filled up my whole world. The light of the moon pouring out of this ancient forest god and into my head, filling me up, lighting me up. His voice was there in my head with the light. Echoing. Deafening. Maddening. *“You shall be alone in Amaranth. The only Lunar Eternal to be born in millennia without reckoning. You shall be bound to death, loved by death, empowered by death. But the charnel path cannot be walked with others. You shall have no family, no brothers or sisters. Only yourself. Destruction shall be your gift and your only companion. So this I name you, Maulkin. Brother only to slaughter.”*

My ears were ringing, and my vision came back only slowly, first as shadows, then as shapes, then finally in full detail. Chernghast had gone back to his place in the shadows, Baal Gharron was looming over my prone body like a clicking mother hen. Even Losna seemed concerned for my welfare, in the sense that they'd coiled around my body in a wide circle and were hissing and spitting wrath at everyone except me. Aww, they really did care. I got back to my feet as fast as I could manage. None of the other Eternals seemed to have fallen down when they were getting named, so I had already managed to mark myself as the weirdo of the group. Although the whole “opposite sides of a celestial war” thing probably had an impact on our potential friendships too.

The room seemed a lot brighter now. All the shadows receded, and it only took me a moment to realize it was because light was now coming out of my eyes. I had wondered why they kept the place so dim before, but I suppose when you are one big flashlight, it makes sense to save on the electric bill.

You are mine now, Maulkin. Let us see what you are made of.

Knowledge suddenly burst like a pulsar into my head, setting me staggering all over again. I knew things I had no way of knowing. I knew Amaranth. The scents, the sounds, the taste of the water, and the sound of the wind. More than that though, I knew myself.

Maulkin – Chagnar Faun of the Lunar Court – 1st Tier of Glory

Statistics:

HP: 300/300

Devotion: 200/200

Glory: 300

Attributes:

Potency: 18

Celerity: 17

Vitality: 11

Piety: 4

Skills:

None

Traits:

Relentless: *The Faun are the greatest hunters on Amaranth, known for pursuing prey for days or even weeks at a time before closing in to strike.*

Effect: *Faun are immune to fatigue, their Attributes do not degrade over time without rest.*

Acolyte of Chernghast: *Chosen by the wolf that waits, you bear his invisible mark and walk the path that will someday make you the personification of inevitable death.*

Effect: *The presence of the dead reinvigorates you. For every corpse within your Sphere of Influence, all of your attributes are increased by 1.*

4 unallocated attribute points remaining.

It was me, broken down into numbers and words. Everything about me was there to see the moment I turned my attention inwards. The moonlight inside me illuminated it all. Concentrating on the bit about unallocated points to spend seemed to slow the world around me down to a crawl so I could focus on what I was doing. I didn't even need to give it a second thought. It was all going into Potency.

Attributes:

Potency: 22

Celerity: 17

Vitality: 11

Piety: 4

With a little flare of light behind my eyes, the number changed, and so did I. The muscles all over me thickened again, bulging and stretching out my skin in a sudden surge of raw power. I felt like I could tear this whole place apart with my bare hands, brick by brick. It passed fast, but I could already see how addictive that rush was going to get.

Eosphel was the one to spoil the afterglow, booming out, "Eternals, someday you may ascend to join us here in these celestial courts. Earn Glory, gain power, remake Amaranth in our image. Serve us well and ascend. Fail us, and fall into obscurity."

Stick and carrot all in one go. Maybe he was the god of pep talks and middle managers?

Baal Gharron nudged me to turn and face the braying ass, whispering in my ear, "Be ready, my sweetness."

"The time has come for your quests to begin. Farewell, Eternals."

Bilaphel surged forward, morning-stars sweeping in an arc, trailing light like comets. First, the Alvaren caught a blow right in her gorgeously sculpted face. It wasn't so pretty afterward. It was a caved-in gory mess, smoking at the edges. The body I'd just started admiring collapsed like a heap of wet noodles.

Her cut-off cry of surprise gave the others a chance to respond, but they weren't quick enough. The Dvergar tried to run, but Bilaphel clubbed him down with a backhanded lash as he passed. Blood splattered and sizzled across the marble floor.

The white-haired human woman and the blue-scaled Inyoka didn't run. They tried to stand their ground—for all the good that it did them. Bilaphel moved too fast for the eyes to follow. So fast that a trail of flames was left in their wake. The human was split in half at waist height by the arc of sun-bright flame. The Inyoka fared ever so slightly better, ducking under the first sweep of the morning-star only to be caught by the other across the chest. I could have lived a long and happy life never knowing what his insides looked like.

I wasn't going down like a chump to that flashy bronze dick. I might not have had weapons, but I had arms big enough to punch out a reasonably sized elephant. Let him come for me and see what happened to him.

Turns out, I should have been paying less attention to the tin-can man and more attention to the spider on my back. Baal Gharron's fangs slipped into my shoulder so smoothly I didn't even feel them at first, pulsing as her venom flooded into me. At once, the light in my eyes seemed to go out. Darkness rushed in all around me as I died for the second time in a day.

You'd think that practice would make perfect, but of my two deaths, getting dissolved from the inside out by spider venom was actually a lot worse. The two points where the fangs were stuck in me were blessedly numb, but it felt like lava was being piped into everything else. As fast as I'd gained all my new strength it faded away. I was only standing because she had me impaled.

“Die now, my sweetness. So sweet... So sweet... Die and live again. And again. And again...”

Chapter 4

When I woke up, everything stayed dark. The pain was gone. The burning and freezing vanished in a moment, but it was replaced with some new sensations that I didn't love either. Mostly weight, pressing in on me from all sides. Darkness, weight, and no air to breathe. My lungs were straining and heaving with no success. Where the hell was I? What the hell was happening?

I probably would have died all over again if it hadn't been for Chernghast's voice in my head.

Rise from your grave.

It all came back to me in a flash, and the second that I realized that I was buried alive, my arms started moving. Mechanically at first, then with more haste, more power. Muscles straining and groaning. Lungs burning all the way. When I broke the surface and my fingers found nothing but air and blades of grass, I might have let out a little moan of delight—if I'd had any air left to do it.

With one hand out, it should have been as easy as pulling myself up and out, but I had no such luck. No sooner did I breakthrough did something up there then grab onto my wrist, its claws digging into my skin. The rest of me might have still been stuck in the dark, but whatever was up there must have been too hungry to wait. It was trying to pull me up like a turnip.

Well, this vegetable was going to bite back.

I pulled back against the grip, using this new enemy's footing to haul myself up and pulling them off balance—they weren't as big as me. I doubted many people would be now. Once my head broke through the dirt, I gasped in my first breath of Amaranth. It tasted like soil and camphor. The sky above was vast, rich, and purpled with sunset. That was all the time I had for sightseeing before the fighting started.

Most of my grappler's slim body was concealed by a hooded sack-cloth cassock, but I could see the hand latched onto me. Scaly, pale as a flat-worm, and just as clammy to the touch. This dude had serious evil minion vibes.

I jerked my arm out of his grip, slamming both of my fists down onto the packed earth to haul myself up and out in one motion. The body-farmer skittered back out of reach, and I didn't blame him. Hauling something as big as me out the ground was a ridiculous show of strength that would have had me running for my life, at least in my old life, but I didn't wait to see if intimidation was going to work. I put my head down and charged.

Slick as oil, he slipped under my outspread arms, like he knew where I was going to be before I did. At this point, he probably did. This new body of mine handled like a boat. When I missed him, I plowed right by and slammed into the rocky outcropping that overlooked this little patch of dirt. With my bulldozer-like momentum behind me, a human would have snapped their neck like a twig. Instead, I just hit the rock with an echoing thump. It hurt, but it didn't drop me.

[Health 286/300]

"At this moment in time, I am not your enemy, Eternal."

Growling at the pain, I charged back in the first moment I could see straight. "That is..."

And missed again.

“Weirdly...”

And again.

“Specific...”

And again.

“Phrasing!”

I'd turned the first charge into a haymaker that should have snapped him in two. He sidestepped it contemptuously. Punch after punch I grazed by the frayed edge of his robes, never quite hitting. Always a moment too slow.

There was a tail swishing behind him for counterbalance, and every once in a while, I caught a glimpse of a scaly snout under the hood. When his scaled skin poked out into the dusk light he was opalescent, and some little bit of my newfound knowledge of Amaranth was whispering to me that paleness wasn't right.

Even now, the damn lizard didn't seem to be all that ruffled. “All truths can become lies with time, Eternal. I speak only of this moment when I would aid you, not do you harm. There are those who know me as the White Prophet. Such a name will serve at this time.”

My blood was pumping, but I could see that I was getting nowhere throwing punches. This really wasn't fair. Giving me an awesome fighting monster body and then putting me up against literal gods and slithery lizard men that I couldn't even touch. “What do you want?”

“To guide you to your purpose. To instruct you in the use of your gifts. “

To point me at whoever he didn't like and fire me off like a cannon. Figures. It seemed that everyone in this new afterlife wanted to use me for something. “How did you find me? Even I didn't know where I was going to be...born.”

“There are those of us in this world who can read the ebbs and flows of fate as others see the coming of the tide. Those who can look to the patterns of the past and predict...”

I let my fists ease down to my sides. My head still hurt, but I wasn't going to let this snake see me hurting. Predators pick off the injured first. The wolf had gobbled me because I was out of breath. I wasn't going to make that mistake twice in one day. “You can see the future. Got it.”

“Neither mortal nor god can see the true shape of things to come, Eternal.” He gestured grandly to the sky. “I study prophecy and the stars, but those are but long shadows cast by the great events of the future.”

“Prophecy, stars, shadows. Got it.” I stretched my arms out to their full breadth and drew in a deep breath, finding that even after all my digging and punching, my arms weren't tired. I could get used to this. “So what is my first lesson? Let's get the tutorial out of the way so I can start whooping wyrms.”

His eyes never left me. Yellow so pale they were almost white, but slit vertically with a line of black, they twitched and narrowed as he studied every detail of my face. “Let us first acquaint you with the limits of your new flesh and serve our second purpose also.”

Demanding that I do his bidding less than a minute after I stopped trying to hit him? That was quicker than anticipated. “Which is?”

He gestured to the shovel laying in the long grass beside my grave. “We must retrieve the other Eternals before they expire.”

Why does the new guy always have to do all the hard manual labor?

For all my grumbling, which now sounded so deep in my chest that it was PRACTICALLY seismic, I didn’t actually mind the digging all that much. I expected it to be the same miserable slog as having to do hard work back in my old life, but with this body and the new rules of engagement. The little aches pains and strains never showed up, and my stamina was now governed by statistics rather than something more nebulous.

It also helped that in this world, hard work actually paid off. As I dug, there was a tickle in the back of my brain, the spinning of a counter up from the grand total of zero experience that I’d come into the world with. To start with, it clicked up by one with every shovelful of dirt. Then it slowed gradually until it was only clicking every fifteen or twenty. It had already jumped up from my abortive fight with tall, white, and handsome. Even when I missed, I’d ended up learning something from the attempt.

Hah, here I was. I’d been an agent of the gods for all of five minutes, and I already sounded like I belonged on a motivational poster. Next, I’d be dangling off a branch and telling people to hang in there.

The ground here was rough, layers of clay under the topsoil. There were dry grass and huge chunks of old masonry sunken down within that and lumps of stone that had to be pried out and tossed aside. Either I was even stronger than I’d thought to plow through all this on my way up, or the others were buried deeper. Or white-snake over there was talking a load of nonsense, and I was the only one popping up in this particular field. I was starting to believe that it was the last option when the blade of my shovel nearly went right through an upraised hand.

It was pale, slender, feminine. Probably not the Dvergar or the lizard. Yet there was a rosiness to that hand that didn’t match up to what I remembered of the Alvaren. I grabbed the wrist and pulled, hauling up the skinny white-haired human girl that I’d caught a glimpse of back in the Celestial Court. Thankfully, the gods had seen fit to toss some rags on our bodies before we sprung up because this situation was awkward enough without nudity. Just like me, she came up swinging. Unlike me, she could actually hit the person who’d pulled her out of the ground.

She was basically dangling in my grip, so she didn’t have much leverage, but she also had both her legs free and clear. She twisted her whole body, slamming a foot into my temple. On a human, it would have been devastating. In this situation, she probably hurt her foot more than she hurt me.

Sighing loudly, I dropped her on her head in the freshly turned soil, just to make a point. “Last time I’m helping you.”

She’d turned the head-drop into a roll and was on her knees, ready to spring up again before she spluttered out, “You talk?”

“Better than you kick.”

Her pretty little face had been all twisted up with stress and fury until now, but the minute I said that, it did what it was made for. Smirking. Maybe her eyes would have sparkled. Instead, they just flared white-hot for a moment.

When I held out my hand to help her up, she took it. “I’m Maulkin, I guess.”

“They called me Mercy.”

“Ironically?” I tried out a smirk of my own, wishing I had a mirror to see how it looked on this new face.

“Listen, pal, you’re a big scary-looking monster, and I just got buried alive. That’s enough to make anyone twitchy.”

I handed her my shovel with a grin. “You can make it up to me by helping dig out the others.”

One by one, we hauled up the Eternals from the Inyoka’s little vegetable patch. I caught the other Inyoka by the tail and hauled him ass-first into his new life, then we moved on to the last patch while Mercy and the Prophet struggled together to pull the Alvaren girl out. We heard her more than saw her. It had been a couple of minutes now, and I was starting to worry about the little guy still under the ground. He wouldn’t die permanently if we didn’t get to him in time, but who knew where he’d pop up again.

The blue-scaled Inyoka and I didn’t have much time for chatter while we worked. We traded names—he was Asher—but that was the extent of the pleasantries. I’d finally worked up a sweat, though there was still no weakness or real signs that I was starting to tire.

We must have been halfway down to the Dvergar when Asher dove to the ground and a shovel cracked into the back of my head.

I’m not too proud to admit I ate dirt. My thick skull saved me from serious injury, but my ears rang, and the force of the blow knocked me over. I was getting really tired of this crap, and I’d only been alive for a few minutes.

By the time I was up, everyone was yelling. The Alvaren was the one swinging for me, shouting something about me being “The enemy.”

The other two Eternals were yelling right back at her, the albino snake man was sidling away, and despite all the noise that they were making, I couldn’t help but notice that none of them were actually stepping in between the crazy lady with a spade and me. This was a new world, with new rules. Maybe she was right? Maybe we were meant to kill each other on sight. It didn’t feel right to me though.

I used my own spade like a crutch to get back to my feet and groaned, “What was that for?”

The Alvaren’s golden gaze snapped back to me, her eyes narrowed, and she charged. She cleared the distance faster than you could blink. At the last moment, she leapt. I barely got the haft of my own shovel up to catch the blade of hers as it descended.

New Skill Discovered! [Combat]

Combat: Rank 1/10

34 Experience Gained

Even with all my strength, the blow would have ripped the shovel from my hands, so I just let it happen. Instead of getting hauled off balance, I let the shovel fall away between our bodies and grabbed for her instead. She was quick, but not as quick as the Inyoka.

My arms wrapped around her lithe body, and I squeezed. Her arms were pinned to her sides. Her superior speed was useless in a bear hug. Struggle as she might, it was inevitable now. I cuddled her

close until the bones of her ribcage started to creak, and the spade fell useless from her fingers. Her eyes burned huge, so close to my face I was surprised I couldn't feel the heat. I certainly felt the heat of the rest of her pressed up against me.

Exerting this much pressure without going further and truly doing damage was harder than it looked. It was a constant balancing act between the danger of her slipping free and the natural instinct to crush the life out of her for sucker-shoveling me. I grunted, "If I wanted you dead, I'd have left you for the worms."

"What you want doesn't matter. The gods told us that you had to die." She strained against me, kicking my knees as if that were going to make me drop her. "So die."

The albino Inyoka finally stepped up. "The stars have aligned to bring you all here. Of all Amaranth, you have been born together, here. Do you not wonder why? Do you not wish to hear the answers that only I can give you."

She stopped wriggling and looked around at her fellow Solar Eternals, expecting them to jump to her defense. Shame I'd just hauled them kicking and screaming into the world, and their loyalties were a bit shaky. Mercy rolled her eyes. "We can always start murdering each other after we've heard what the White Prophet has to say."

Asher just shrugged. Murdering me or not murdering me, it was apparently all the same to him. Thanks for that, Asher. I'll remember that next time you're buried alive and digging sideways instead of up. Still, that shrug seemed to do the trick. She stopped writhing about and let me carefully place her down.

There was a long tense moment as I waited to see if she tried to kill me again, but when the attempted murder didn't arrive, I asked, "Can we dig up the little guy now?"

We were almost too late as it turned out. The shouting and spading match had stolen the vital minutes before the Dvergar began to suffocate, and it was only thanks to his species prodigious endurance that he survived until we could reach him. He couldn't even speak by the time we hauled him out, the poor Dvergar alternating between coughing up clods of dirt and weeping incessantly, leaving two little trails down his face that weren't covered in soil and a grimy-looking snot bubble on his stubbly lip.

The Prophet looked him over where he lay, tail lashing with concern. "Let us move him inside. He needs time to recover, and this is not a safe place."

I gave the Alvaren the stink eye. "No kidding."

Now that the initial panic had passed, I was able to take in the sights. I'd kind of expected some gentle starting area with a friendly village and friendly gnomes or something, but instead, we were treated to desolation. Beyond the scrubby grass and the withered old camphor trees hiding in the lee of the low cliff-face I'd faceplanted into, there really wasn't much to see. The dying light wasn't as much of an impediment as it could have been, thanks to my built-in torch eyes, but it still sapped visibility over by the shadowed horizon where literally anything interesting might have been hiding.

There were dark patches that might have been low cliffs or even a forest. The thing that stood out to me the most was that this was not some artfully designed theme park wilderness like the one I'd gone hiking in before or a pristine park with careful rows of trees and plants. No human hands, or any other creature's for that matter, had shaped this land. The rain and the wind had swept through,

battering the earth below. The earth had stood up for itself where it could. And over the top of all that tumult, life had clung on.

As a troupe, we carried the Dvergar up and around the ridge, although I could probably have tucked him under one arm and been done with it. Beneath our feet, there were glimpses of stone protruding from the packed soil, worked and carved, then clotted up with moss over the years until they were indistinguishable from the shale.

Sitting back from the ridge, hidden from our view when we struggled out OF the dirt, was a low-slung building. It was part ruin, part ramshackle work of hastily hammered together boards. The crowning achievement of the thing was a dome—the only pristine part of the construction—smooth and broken only by the telescope poking up out of it. An observatory.

Getting close, I could see the crooked hanging door of the place had been another late addition, but the stonework was still that same ancient work of engraving that we'd been walking all over. Great smooth whorls were cut into the stone, and I let my fingers trail over them as I ducked through the door. My skin was almost a match for the grey of the stone, and my thick fingers looked like part of the engravings for the moment I paused. Better not to think about that too long.

Inside, the floorboards had all rotted away, leaving that same scrubby grass and dirt. There was only one grand old room, patched all over the place and every part of it surrounding the colossal telescope. There was a little cot bed set up in one corner. It didn't have any covers on it despite the chill of the night air creeping in through all the little cracks and crevasses where the walls didn't quite join up, but that was probably a cold-blooded thing. There was a haphazard hearth in another corner, smearing the roof above it with soot. Everywhere else was a scattered array of bizarre instruments I guessed had to do with stellar observation, the tools surrounded by or partially covered by reams upon reams of yellowed paper. Stacked up on every flat surface in the place, I could see that they were all filled with scribbled ciphers and astronomical symbols that even my new brain couldn't decipher. Books seemed to be few and far between, treated with more reverence than the scribbled notes, and placed on high shelves that looked liable to fall off the wall if you sneezed too hard. Basically, it looked like some madman's shack, and if it weren't for the fact that the White Prophet was literally the first and only person I'd met on this planet, I'd have been sidling towards the door about now, remembering that I'd left the cat on the stove.

The other Eternals, on the other hand, seemed to take the madhouse's appearance in stride. I saw Mercy make a face when we first got in the room, but the moment the duo of Inyoka turned to face us, she wiped it away fast. The Prophet started to ramble. "As all places and things are temporal and limited to the moment that we encounter them, so too is this one. I have been here but a short time, awaiting the precise moment of your coming."

"Yeah, the place hardly looks lived in." I couldn't help myself. Mercy snorted in a very unladylike way but managed to get her face straightened out before the Prophet looked her way again.

He ignored us, pushing back his hood for the first time and exposing his distinctly serpentine face. Asher looked closer to an iguana or something, but this pointed white face reminded me of a milk snake. "There is much that I must tell you. Much that you must know of the past before you can shape the future, but our time together is limited. You have come in a time of great crisis for this world, though most would deny it if they could. They would shelter in lies to protect their own power, pretend that all is as it always has been and doom is not fast approaching."

I clapped my hands, startling the Alvaren. "Okay, history lesson of doom. Let's have it."

She hissed at me. “Will you shut up? The sooner he is done, the sooner we can kill you.”

“That really doesn’t encourage me to speed things along as much as you’d think.”

She lunged for me, and before Mercy and Asher could catch hold of her, she had one hand locked around one of my horns and the other pulled back in a fist.

On reflection, I probably should have just taken the hit and scored some sympathy points with the other Eternals, but this body was hardwired for action, and I really don’t like it when people punch me in the face.

I bucked, jerking my head and horns up out of reach and hauling her off her feet. She let out a little yelp, and I was able to catch her by the arm as she fell. “We’ve got to stop meeting like this. I don’t even know your name.”

She wasn’t so pretty when she was hissing. Alvaren faces seemed to be pretty narrow at the best of times, and the sneer-squint combo made her look distinctly like a ferret. Mercy piped up. “She’s Orphia. I heard Bilaphel name her.”

The Prophet’s clawed hands were there between us a moment later, pulling Orphia away when I gratefully released her, giving us both some breathing room.

The Dvergar had progressed to wheezing down on the ground, which was probably a sign he was getting better? Asher crouched over him, checking his airways were clear as best he could. “This one is Uthelred. Named by the Queen. He is unwell.”

“Choking on dirt will do that to you.”

Asher’s tail lashed. “He breathes well. I mean his mind. The experiences of the day have damaged him.”

Mercy shrugged. “Dying twice in one day would do that for you.”

“This fate has oft befallen Eternals throughout history.” The Prophet was stoking the fire, beckoning us all closer. “When the weight of memories becomes too great, Eternals retreat from the world. Some into their own minds, and some into the wild places where mortals fear to tread.”

So we have trauma-dementia to look forward to. Fantastic. This gig is sounding better by the minute. I dragged my eyes away from the Dvergar, deliberately ignored Orphia, and faced the rest.

The Prophet sank down in front of the fire, coiling his tail over his crossed legs so it didn’t burn. “May I continue?”

Begrudgingly, we all settled down for storytime like we were children. All except Orphia, who parked herself up on the stool by the verdigris-green eyepiece of the telescope. Holding herself above the rest of us. What a charmer.

The warmth of the fire was nice after the cold of the grave and the cool wind. A nap might have been in order if it weren’t for everyone being out to kill me.

“The Dvergar wanted a god. In the light, we had the sun and moon to guide us, but deep beneath the earth, they sought out the Void. Araphel, the living darkness. He rose, a match for any one of the gods in their courts but bound by none of their rules. He walked Amaranth. He destroyed. All the powers of creation were arrayed against him but found wanting. No mortal power could match him.”

“But somebody did.” For a change, it was Mercy who butted in. “Somebody killed him.”

The Prophet turned from his introspection to face her. “Nobody was there to see him die. Yet his influence seemed to leave the world, so all took it to be the truth that he had been slain. The story goes that some unknown hero confronted the dark one alone and slew him. There is a great blighted land where he was said to have died, and this can still be seen. The Rustlands. Still stained with blood. And at the heart of the blight, a sword, rusted from freshly forged to shards by Araphel’s dying curse.”

That sucked. Imagine that you finally got it together and killed the big bad dark lord only for it to self-destruct so hard that nobody even knew who won the fight.

“Each shard was taken by one of the peoples who had opposed Araphel. Each one served as their rallying banner and symbol in the days to come. Ownership of a piece of the Rusted Blade became the foundation of dynasties and empires. Yet now all have forgotten that it was once a real weapon. The only weapon to ever wound a god.”

As far as clout went, holding a hunk of god-slaying metal probably helped anyone’s street cred. I started trying to work out how many pieces there must have been. Humans got one, Alvaren, Dvergar, and Wyrms too, I’d bet. So that was four at least. Would the Eternals get one? Did we count as our own people? Maybe there would be a Q and A at the end of the mad lizard’s ramble.

“What is not so widely known is this. Araphel returns. All of the stars and portents warn of his coming. Yet try as the learned might, they cannot convince the ignorant of their doom. He is coming back, and there are none who will stand to oppose him. The Alvaren are gone. The Wyrms hide in seclusion to wait out the age of mortals. The Dvergar cower in their hills, shivering at their last brush with the Void. The humans rule over much of Amaranth now, and they waste that sovereignty by squabbling amongst themselves.”

I could feel Orphia staring daggers at me as she asked, “What of the Faun?”

“The Chagnar Faun? Most would welcome Araphel with open arms. A return to the past glories that they still dream of. You shall have no help from them.”

With a sigh, the Prophet spread his arms wide. “So it is to the Eternal servants of the divine, that I must turn. You must make ready for the coming of Araphel. You must forge the Rusted Blade anew and turn the only weapon the God ever feared against it once more.”

A big fetch quest. Not exactly original, but at least it was pretty straightforward. Find shards. Make sword. Kill god. Easy. I guess now was Q and A time. “How many shards are there?”

“From the histories of the free peoples, we have identified six distinct shards in all. Each granted to one great champion of each race and passed down through the generations.”

Asher counted them off on his fingers. “Humans, Dvergar, Alvaren, Wyrms, Eternals, and... Faun?”

The Prophet nodded, but there was no way that Orphia was letting that one slip by without comment. “Why the hell would they give the Faun a shard? They were the enemy.”

“The Faun have no written histories, so I do not know for certain—and much of what we know about that time from other sources has been colored by more recent clashes between the free people. Perhaps it was a term of the peace treaty. Perhaps some few Faun fought back against their overlord and this was their reward. None can say for certain. The truth has been lost to time.”

“I’d believe they extorted it before I’d believe in a hero Faun.” Orphia scoffed.

That was enough for Mercy. “Are you kidding me? How can you already be racist when you didn’t even know most of these races existed before today?”

“The gods were very clear about who we should trust, if you had only listened more closely to their guidance.”

Asher sighed, and it made all the scales on his body ripple out of place and then back again, like a bird puffing out its feathers. “Can you please let him finish?”

The Prophet had been sitting silently, waiting for us to shut up. Good thing Asher was here, or he might have died of old age. “I shall share what I can with you about the last-known locations of the Shards, but first I would prepare you for your task more thoroughly. The powers of the Eternals are not widely known, but I have made a study of the few texts available so that I might better instruct you in the gifts that you have received.”

This was starting to sound more like it. A quick blast of tutorial junk to learn how skills, the Divine Pillars, and Glory worked, and then we could get out there and start kicking ass.

The Prophet moved from sitting to standing in one fluid motion like he’d just come up out of a toaster. “Come with me, and your first lesson shall begin.”

At his direction, I dragged the cot out into the middle of the room and revealed a trapdoor. It was thick old wood, not the new stuff that the building had been patchworked with. This had been part of the original structure before the prophet slapped an observatory on top. It took all my strength to haul the thing open. Stairs stretched down into the darkness, and he led us down in single file, Orphia at the front and me bringing up the rear with a Dvergar over my shoulder. A buffer of two sane people between me and the Alvaren seemed smart. I didn’t want to give her any opportunities to stab me in the back.

Up on the surface, this building wasn’t all that impressive. I mean, it was kind of impressive that it was still standing and that it could support the weight of the observatory dome despite being 50% stone and 50% crumbles.... Anyway, the point is, this place was like the proverbial iceberg—not a lot up top but huge beneath the surface. The stairs led into a long corridor which then twisted, turned, and branched out. If any one of us wasn’t lost by the time we came to the big, dank cellar where we stopped then I would have been surprised.

“From my tomes, I have learned that you came from other worlds and lived other lives before being chosen to come here. There has been much debate about the meaning of this among scholars.”

The cellar was different from any I’d ever known. The piles of miscellaneous crap and broken lawnmowers were missing. Even the big barrels of booze that I’d been hoping for were conspicuous in their absence. I’d been looking forward to seeing how wine-drunk a Faun could get.

The Prophet rambled on. “All that is known for certain is that the laws of those worlds were different from those here, and the life lessons learned differed along the same lines.”

Now that we were stopped, my eyes began adjusting to the darkness, flaring a little more moonlight. It was definitely an empty room. The stone walls showed the same whorls as I’d seen upstairs, but the floor was made up of tiles instead of the flagstones or packed dirt of the previous

corridors. A great big mosaic depiction of a dragon and a giant bird of prey wrestling with each other. Hot.

“Yup.” Mercy was crouched down, studying the mosaic inch by inch like it was hiding secrets. “Things were definitely different back on Earth.”

“Then let me be the first to share the most vital lesson to your survival on Amaranth.” The Prophet ran a clawed finger over one of the great whorls on the wall, one indistinguishable from all the rest to my eyes but apparently special judging by the way that it suddenly started to glow green.

“Do not trust anyone.”

The tiles of the floor, which had been solid as a rock beneath our feet just a moment ago, fell apart with the sound of shattering glass.

Every tile rained down around us as we plummeted into the darkness. The last I saw of the White Prophet, he was standing on the one patch of paper-thin tiles that hadn't moved as we tumbled into the pit below.

Then even my eyes couldn't pierce the darkness anymore.

Chapter 5

Did I mention that I was getting really tired of this crap?

We were only falling for a moment, but it seemed to stretch out endlessly. Mercy was tumbling head over heels, and Asher had spread-eagled himself to try to land flat. The only one falling with any sort of grace was Orphia, arms outstretched and feet pointed down—like she was falling on purpose.

I wasn't sure when it happened, but I'd wrapped myself around the Dvergar so that he wouldn't get mangled on landing. I guess I felt protective of the little guy.

We hit the stone floor together. I landed on my back, the rebounding dead weight of Uthelred hammering into my chest in a pincer movement of pain.

[Health 191/300]

From the moans around me, I guessed that the others had just been introduced to their health scores for the first time. I rolled the Dvergar off me with some of my very own grunts and grumbles. "Wish you'd wake up, little guy."

By the time that we were vaguely upright, the tiles were fluttering back up to form a distant roof. The room down here was bigger than the one upstairs, but rusted metal bars ran along the length of it, separating us from the extended part and the door that led out of this new prison. There was no gate on our cage, and judging from the bones scattered around the place, there was not meant to be. There was no way in or out now that we'd been dropped.

I scooped up a human skull and threw it at the roof, round about where the Prophet had been standing, but all it did was shatter and shower us all with bone meal. I didn't think it would actually work, but if I didn't try then I'd never be certain.

Orphia was quick to take the opportunity to blame me for getting dust in her hair. "Idiot."

"I didn't see you spotting the trap either." I was feeling sore and petty. Can you blame me?

Mercy had landed worse than the rest of us. She was still sitting down, nursing a bleeding nose and trying to will away the dizziness. Despite that, she was still aware enough to reach out and grab Orphia's leg as she charged at me yet again. There was quite the crunch when that pretty Alvaren face met the flagstones. Now both of them had nosebleeds.

They scrambled to their feet, ready to fight, but Asher was already there with his clawed hands up, ready to intervene. "This is not the time to fight amongst ourselves."

I liked the sentiment there, but honestly, it seemed like it was probably the best time to fight among ourselves. It wasn't like there was anything else to keep us entertained down here. Oubliettes don't get cable tv.

"What do you think that you are doing?"

While Mercy and Orphia had the beginnings of a good screaming match, albeit one that sounded a bit nasal after their falls, I went to take a look at the bars. If they were as rusted through as they looked, they might not be any more of an impediment than a beaded curtain.

"From the minute we got here you've been looking down your pointy nose at us..."

The bars were pretty solid underneath the top layers of crumbling orange and brown—spaced close enough that even one of the waifish races wouldn't have been able to squeeze through. I took a hold of them and flexed my new muscles. All that Potency had to count for something.

“The fact that you are so ready to cast aside your divinely ordained duty, simply because it is convenient in the moment, is...”

I strained and strained with all of my strength, and I could feel movement in the metal. The bars thrummed with the pressure as my arms began to shake. I was strong now. I could do this. The old me might have struggled to open a pack of tortilla chips like this but I was Maulkin.

Sweat pricked my brow, but the bars did not bend. My shoulders began to scream, and still, the bars did not bend. With one last heave, I put everything that I had into pulling the bars apart, and...they did not bend. Whatever Potency I needed to bend metal with my bare hands, I just wasn't there yet.

I turned my attention inward, and once more the world around me seemed to slow. The nasal whine of Orphia's bitching turning into a solid bass note. I pulled up all the information that this new world provided me about myself but skimmed past the stats, racial attributes, and the single skill point I'd acquired in Combat. There had to be more here. We were Eternals from the moment we landed on Amaranth, it wasn't something that we earned with time, so surely they wouldn't have dumped us here, powerless.

I stopped on The Pillars of Divinity and gave it my full attention—the way that I had the Eosphel's holograms. Only a moment was all it took for the text to blossom out into a vision that filled my entire mind. I was on some great dark plane with only a few pinpricks of moonlight shining around my feet—a light so faint it would have been invisible if I were not surrounded by such deep shadows. There were seven pinpricks in all. Seven tiny stars on the ground. I closed my distance with the first of them, and that strange text that the gods used whispered up out of it.

Cosmos – *The shaping of reality.*

I stepped on to the next.

Omnis – *The knowledge of all things.*

These were the different pillars. The different types of power I'd be able to unlock with Glory.

Ascension – *The rebirth of the self.*

Primal – *The creation of life.*

Aether – *The mastery of souls.*

Creation – *The building of worlds.*

Artifice – *The remaking of materials.*

That last one was what I needed. Not turning into animals to seduce milkmaids, not throwing lightning bolts, and not making things; remaking things. Remaking things like metal bars.

I reached out to touch the light, and it flared to life at my attention. I could feel my hands shaking, even though I had no idea why. I reached out again, and the light turned solid at my touch. With the sound of crushing ice, it hardened into a crystalline pillar, thin as a thread for now, but it was sure to get thicker the more of my Glory I poured in.

Slipping back to view my mental character sheet once more, I could see *Artifice Tier 1* marked down there. I was committed to it now. But even with the Pillar active, I still didn't see any new powers. There had to be something I could use. Some reason for empowering a pillar to start with.

The big spider lady said that my powers would show up AS skills once they were unlocked, so I jumped up to that. There were 314 experience points hovering there, just waiting to be spent. I didn't know how much of that came from digging, and how much came from listening to lectures, but either way. I wasn't letting them go to waste.

Skills began to roll out in a huge toilet-paper long list, every single starting skill that you could choose from listed out so fast that I barely had time to recognize them as words before a dozen more had flown by. I stopped the list at random, somewhere in the vicinity of "Igneous Arcanum: 100XP Per Rank" and then started over, concentrating only on the skills that seemed to be glowing with moonlight.

Artifice Tier 1: Rough Hewn Weapons

Artifice Tier 1: Rough Hewn Armor

Artifice Tier 1: Rough Hewn Architecture

Artifice Passive Ability: Sphere of Influence

The passive ability seemed to be tied to the other three, like unlocking them would give you it as a freebie. There certainly wasn't any way to invest in it directly. It would have been nice to say that I considered Architecture or Armor first, but I really didn't. Too many attempts had already been made on my life for me to pick anything else. I needed to be able to fight back, and that meant weapons.

The downside of these *Celestial Skills* was the price tag. Chernghast was whispering to me that they cost three-hundred experience points per rank instead of a hundred. Still, raw experience was probably easy to come by, weapons weren't. I poured my experience into *Rough Hewn Weapons* with a weird tickly sensation in my brain then suddenly I just knew how to use it. The same thing happened with *Sphere of Influence* without having to pony up any more experience, thankfully.

Opening up my eyes, I could now feel everything within that *Sphere* nearby, like my nervous system had just jumped a few feet outside of my body and could now take in all the information I needed from everything around me. I could feel the temperature and pressure of the air. I could taste the iron content in the bars.

It was hard at first, like the first time you moved a muscle you didn't know that you had. I had to strain to draw the iron out of the bars—and strain even harder to turn the small amount of actual metal into something resembling a weapon. I'd been imagining a big sword, like something an anime character would swing around, defying all laws of physics in the process. Instead, I got a cleaver. A hunk of raw metal flattened out into a rectangle and finished down on one side with a chipped and ragged edge. I guess proper swords needed more metal than I had to work with along with somebody doing less *Rough Hewn* work than I was. It didn't matter though. I had something I could use to fight, and three of the bars crumbled away to orange dust on the floor.

Time jumped back to its usual tempo, and I turned to the others just in time to see Mercy ducking under a kick. "Hey!"

My little shout didn't interrupt them for a moment. Orphia was still coming at the other woman with everything she had, and Mercy was still scrambling to get out of the way. Asher was just

standing there watching them, and Uthelred was just lying there watching the wall. I was getting the impression I was the only one who was going to do anything.

I charged in to break up the fight, kind of forgetting about the big blade in my hand. It brought Orphia up fast when she saw it.

She backpedaled away from me rapidly, arms outstretched to pull Asher to safety behind her. I guess staying neutral meant he was on her side in her mind. “I tried to warn you fools! He is going to murder us all. He is the enemy.”

I bent to give Mercy a hand up, which she took gratefully before we turned to face the other Eternals. “I’ve found a way out. We can unlock one of the Divine Pillars and pick out a starting skill, I used mine to remove some bars and make this. I can probably make some weapons for all of us if you just...”

“Drop the blade.”

“Hey now. I haven’t been trying to jump you this whole time.”

“Drop the blade or we fight for it, this very moment.” Orphia hissed.

The light seemed to have gone out in Asher’s eyes. The sunlight dimming until it was barely a glow. His breathing looked like it had stopped too, but it was kind of hard to tell how fast he was meant to be breathing. Did lizards breathe the same as mammals? I wish I’d read more books before I died. Science ones. Not ones with dragons and chainmail bikinis on the cover. Well, more of them too.

Apparently, this wasn’t the time for introspection. Orphia charged at me, leaping over the Dvergar, hands already reaching out for the cleaver. Since I really didn’t want to cleave her pretty face in half, I did what she’d asked and dropped it. She dived after it, only to catch my foot in her gut.

[15 Damage]

Combat: Rank 2/10

32 Experience Gained

It was enough to knock the wind out of her and send her rolling back across the floor to thump into Uthelred, but somehow, she came up with the cleaver in her hand. She looked from it to me, and something like a smile spread over her face. “Now I have the blade, you are all going to listen to me. Now you are all going to follow my lead. Not that thing over there. He is an abomination. He is the enemy.”

Mercy snarled. “He isn’t the one threatening me with a knife or trying to kick out my teeth.”

Asher seemed to have lit up again, and he was taking in the whole situation with no small degree of interest. Uthelred still wasn’t moving, which was honestly kind of fair—I wouldn’t want to get up for this either.

“You will stand down, Mercy. I know that you have some strange fondness for this beast, but I do not have time to indulge it. He has opened a way out of this cell to win our trust and corrupt us into following his desires. I say that he shall remain here while we use it without the fear of ambush.”

I wet my lips. “So what, you just want me to sit here forever?”

“I want you to die, but I am showing my new friends here that I am willing to compromise my desires and principles to service their needs.”

Mercy let out a little snort. “The scary thing is, this probably *is* her version of a compromise.”

If this was the only way to get out of this without anybody dying, then I was willing to go our separate ways. I didn’t want to, but I figured I could give them an hour’s head start, then start on my own adventure. “Alright, so I’ll stay here, and you’ll head out. Do you guys want me to make you some weapons first? I’ve got no idea what is waiting on the other side of those bars.”

“Our safety is no longer your concern, Faun.” I couldn’t believe that rolling over and submitting was all it was going to take to calm her down.

Mercy pointed to Orphia’s feet, her jaw still clenched. “What about the Dvergar?”

Orphia seemed to remember that he was there for the first time. She crouched down to look him over, seizing his wooly chin and turning his dim eye-lights to face her. “I have no time for useless people.”

I wouldn’t have thought that my haphazard cleaver had much of an edge on it, but it seemed to be sufficient to slit the Dvergar’s throat from ear to ear when Orphia leaned her weight down on it. Mercy and I both let out a cry when we realized what she intended, but it was already too late. Crimson blood was arcing up out of the Eternal’s neck to spatter across the dirt floor.

In those last moments, Uthelred seemed to find some life, jerking up and grabbing at his bleeding throat and then smearing gore on Orphia’s pristine white skin when his dull fingers scrabbled at her. She rose back up to her full height with a sneer that robbed her face of any beauty. “Perhaps now you’ll understand that I am not playing games.”

Then a glow surrounded her like the dull purple-blue light of a plasma ball lamp, and her hair started to rise up as static crackled across her. She took notice, looking down at the sparks crawling over her clothes in confusion.

Asher stepped out into our line of sight. His hands lit up with crackling lightning, and his lipless jaws were moving without pause, mouthing out some secret language that I could not understand or even hear.

When he ripped his claws apart, the lightning leapt out and struck Orphia in the back, conducted through the cloud of ionized air that already enveloped her. Her pristine white skin blackened in an instant as the electrical burns spread, and her hair crisped and blew away. Most importantly of all, the light shining out of her eyes blinked out, and she slumped to the ground on top of her victim. Two dead Eternals in under a minute. We were off to a flying start.

Asher lowered his arms with a barely perceptible shudder. “Worth noting. Spells take longer than expected to cast.”

Both Mercy and I were stunned into silence, but it was for very different reasons. Mercy was looking down at the remains of Orphia as her body went through all the stages of decomposition in a moment. Skin sloughed off. Meat shriveled. Bones crumbled to dust. When it was over, there was no trace that Orphia had ever been there at all—nothing but the rough-hewn cleaver that she’d taken from me. It only took a glance to confirm that the same thing had happened to poor Uthelred.

Orphia deserved whatever she got, but I spared a moment to feel sorry for the little guy. Of course, this was all a bit overwhelming for a regular guy, it was just a shame that he was going to pay for that feeling with his life, repeatedly, until he got over it.

I was pointing at Asher without meaning to. “You learned magic with your starting experience.”

“That is correct.” He cocked his head to the side in puzzlement.

“And you’re an Inyoka.”

“That was also my choice, yes.”

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my excitement under control and failing. “You’re a lizard wizard!”

It was enough to draw Mercy out of her reverie with a groan.

Asher cocked his head the other way, oblivious to my grin. “Queerly phrased, but ultimately accurate.”

Mercy was fighting a giggle and losing. Maybe she didn’t want to encourage any more of my nonsense. I decided to move on before she tried to move me on.

That seemed to wrap everything up with the crazier Eternals for now, so I went back to the cell bars and rubbed my hands together. “So what does everybody want? I’m going to try and make that little chopper into something more substantial. You want knives? If we find some wood, I could maybe do a spear?”

“Are you really going to just go on as if nothing happened?” Mercy was scooping up the cleaver and carrying it over, a little crease forming between her eyebrows.

“Well, the way I figure it, we can have a big cry about one of the folks we came here with being a bit too stab-happy or we can get to work. Either way, we are still going to have to escape from this dungeon, so I figured I’d cut to the chase.”

Asher called over from where he was experimenting with the electric discharging between his claws. “No metal equipment for me if you please, it may turn my lightning back on me.”

“Chargrilled lizard is off the menu. Got it.”

With a strain, I slowed time to a crawl and stripped the metal from the next pair of bars, letting it drop as misshapen ingots in a shower of iron before moving on to the next. Mercy tossed the cleaver on the heap of metal and stopped to watch me work as I made my way along, gathering more and more raw material for the veritable arsenal I was planning for us. Eventually, I couldn’t ignore her stare anymore, so I gave my massive arms a flex and asked, “See something you like?”

“Okay, first off, yuck. Second, can you make me a bow?”

“Yuck? Yuck?! I’ll have you know that I am the most attractive man in this whole dungeon.”

“I’d rather lick the lizard. Bow and arrows? Can you do it?”

I closed my eyes and strained. This time the bars fell in a shower of arrowheads. “We’ll need to find wood and string, but yeah, I can do it.”

Asher was right by my elbow when I turned, and I nearly backhanded him out of pure surprise. “Whoa. Dude!”

“With all due respect to the pair of you, it would be better if you did not refer to me as a lizard. It is as inaccurate as calling you a donkey-bull or her a monkey, and while I understand such things are meant in jest, there may be others in this world who find casual racism less amusing.”

I finally stopped and thought before I spoke. “It didn’t even cross my mind. I’m sorry, man.”

His tongue flicked out, tasting the air. “Asher.”

“Sorry, Asher.”

Mercy mumbled, “Sorry,” too.

I wondered if you could unlock achievements in this world. *First Awkward Apology*. It would have taken me nearly three years before I got that one in my last playthrough of life, yet here we were barely an hour into Amaranth and I was already performing above expectations.

With Mercy’s arrowheads and the metal fixings for her bow made, and something like a bowstring woven from what used to be my shirt, I turned my attention back to the cleaver and the little hillock of metal chunks I’d pushed together with my foot. No time like the present. I closed my eyes and wished for a great big sword, then I put my Artifice to work with a gruff grunt that Asher could have quite rightly pointed out sounded like a goat’s.

I opened my eyes again when the cleaver had put on so much weight it was almost a strain for my new, buff body to lift it. It was still shaped like a cleaver, more or less, with one huge cutting edge stretching along all six-foot of the blade’s length. I’m willing to admit I may have gotten a little carried away, but when you were as strong as I’d become, you sometimes want to flaunt it a little. Plus, I was willing to bet that my big chopper could stop a charging elephant with one whack at this point. I hefted the blunt side up onto my shoulders, leaned my horns back against it, and felt the cool metal sapping the day’s aches away from the knot of muscles up there.

Mercy was staring up at the ragged edge of my giant sword with another little smirk on her face. “Compensating for something?”

“Compensating for how puny the rest of my teammates are.”

We gave the place one last look over for anything of value and were about to head for the door when I let my new *Sphere of Influence* reach out one last time to seek anything hidden among the dried-up carcasses on the floor. The bones hummed at the touch of my power. I was such an idiot.

With a strain of mental effort, the ribs of the nearest dead man tore loose and began a slow orbit about me, fusing together as they passed. Vertebrae snapped clean of the spines that once held them and lengthened out as the force of my will pulled on them. There was no wood down here, but that didn’t mean we lacked materials. By the time I was done, Mercy had her bow and arrows, little bone spurs stretching out of the tail end of each one to serve as a flight. They were rough as hell, but they’d work.

Weirdly, Mercy didn’t look all that pleased when I handed her the pile of corpse-bits that were now her weapon. “And again, I say yuck.”

“Suck it up, buttercup. If you find me a tree, I’ll replace them. Alright?”

She muttered something about my ass and a tree, but even my new heightened senses couldn't quite pick it up.

Asher intervened before I could poke the bear. "Shall we proceed?"

The corridor leading out of the jail was laid with the same mildew-stained flagstones as the cell had been. The only thing that made it more inviting was the faint breeze that was drifting through it. The chill night air was calling out to us. Somewhere out there was a way out of this hole.

It kind of made sense for me to go first, since swinging my sword with either of the other two in front of me was liable to end in friendly fire. Plus, bows and spells didn't require getting all up in a monster's face. I was assuming that this dungeon had monsters in it. That was the deal with dungeons in all my substantial fantasy gaming experience, and I wasn't going to start doubting that truism until I made it through at least three underground installations without anyone trying to murder me. I was giving this one the benefit of the doubt and not counting Orphia since we brought her in with us.

The dark corridor twisted and turned like it was trying to mess up my sense of direction, and if it hadn't been for our light-filled eyes, we would have been completely screwed. Even as it was, Mercy had to shout out a couple of times to warn me before I accidentally tumbled empty-head first into a pitfall. I wasn't sure if they were deliberate traps or just holes caused by disrepair, but I couldn't see the bottom, and I didn't fancy finding out what we could hear living down there in the pitch darkness, chittering away.

Eventually, we came to a pitfall that was definitely deliberate, six feet across with no way around. The tunnel stretched on beyond it, but there was no way forward except to jump. I had been spoiling for a chance to try out all these new muscles, so I wasn't exactly mad about it. Mercy looked down into the pit with a grimace. "Just be careful."

With a laugh, I tossed my sword to clatter on the far side of the pit. "Please, I was made for this."

I took a run-up to the gap.

I made a mighty leap.

I immediately headbutted the ceiling with the horns I'd forgotten were there. Crap.