

Flora's boon and the connection I had to Cammy was crying out. *Nature* was crying out.

"What's going on? What did you do?" I demanded of Discipline, whose eyes glazed over like she was overcome with pleasure.

"I've won." The Lord-Commander of the Order of Piety grinned.

*"Igni!"*

A massive explosion knocked Discipline and Eleanor from each other, blowing the former into the gazebo and destroying it in the process. Belle raced up to her unconscious friend.

"I'm fine," Belle said, cradling Eleanor in her arms. "Get that cunt!"

My wings propelled me forward. Just as I was about to reach her, the teleportation runes beneath Discipline activated and my empowered staff sliced the empty space in front of me. The circle teleported me outside shortly after, but it was like I had stepped into another world.

There were demons everywhere. Flying imps blanketed a sky bathed in blood, wreaking havoc on the populace by bombarding the city with stones and spells. Bone hounds hunted larger prey in packs, forcing orcs to band together in order to fend them off. Flesh golems and greshkas demolished walls and knocked down trees.

It was a page ripped right out of the records detailing what transpired during the Crimson Wars. The Order of Piety was left in disarray. Their leader, Discipline, was nowhere to be seen amongst the chaos.

"Mama!" Cammy entangled half a dozen bone hounds to get to me. Behind her were Liz and Ana, along with the women and young orcs of Ellowyn. "Demons started appearing out of thin air. What should we do?"

"Get them into the tower and stay there. Do you understand me?" I hugged my dryad daughter.

"What will you do?" she asked.

"What I've always done— protect Parthun." I winked.

Cammy held my hand and kept me from taking off. She wasn't hiding her worry at all. I wished so much I could do more to reassure her.

There was another way she could help me.

"Do you know where Miuna and the high priestesses are?" I asked.

Cammy brightened up, suddenly finding herself to be of use and answered, "My roots are telling me Miuna is with Eileen in Ellowyn. Your friends from Vessyra are within Lotharain."

"Thank you!" I embraced my dryad daughter.

Cammy smiled and released her grip on me to begin directing the others to safety.

"Stay with me, Vessyra... I still need your powers," I whispered to myself.

The moment I took off into the sky, I bumped into a skittish erinyes. Her eyes widened. She almost lost hold of her whip. My first thought was to kill her, until I realized who it was.

"Thelia?" My glowing staff was only inches away from bisecting her face. "Give me one good reason why I shouldn't end you now."

"I only just got here! I haven't hurt a soul, I swear! M-My promise— I serve you in exchange for my life. That was our deal, yes?" Thelia stammered over every word.

"If you're truly on my side, get your demons to stop terrorizing my people." I brought the blade of light another inch closer to her nose. She had every reason to flee, but she maintained enough calm not to do anything rash. I might have a greater demon as an ally in her yet.

"I command two hundred of my kin. The rest belong to another— I cannot control them," she said.

"You pledged yourself to me, didn't you?" I asked, grabbing her by the chin and pulling her close. The erinyes swallowed hard and nodded. Her eyes showed subservience, but the resistance from her body language was telling otherwise. "Then say it."

"I... pledge to fight... for you."

When Thelia finished her sentence, I sealed our pact with a kiss. For greater demons, their word was law. To swear an oath, pact, or striking deals, one must see it through to the end because that was their power. In that way, they could at least be commended for their honesty.

Defeating Zertos and forcing him to submit, severed whatever threads of loyalty he had to his masters and further weakened him after I removed the magic crystals. That left every other demon under him without a master. Now they belonged to Thelia, and by extension mine.

Thelia's tongue hung out of her mouth as our lips parted. She was red in the face and panting like she wanted more. I could definitely see why Mira enjoyed this so much.

"Good girl. Clear the skies on this side of the battlefield, and then rally your demons for an assault on the Order of Piety's main camp," I ordered

"As you wish." Thelia bowed and flew into the sky to turn on her fellow demons. A single crack from her whip alerted demons under her command to begin attacking their kin. Her and her army's sudden betrayal became the turning point. The demon horde had fallen into chaos.

I fought my way through to Ellowyn with ease, but the forest around me was in flames.

*"Aqua vas'nu!"*

My spell, amplified by Vessyra's magic, had conjured a rainstorm that quickly doused the fires. Cammy's guardian tree barely survived. Had I taken any minute longer to get here, she might have perished.

"And now... *vanis sleuth!*"

Stray demons got their feet stuck in ice after I sapped the heat from the water, allowing the orcs to better fight them off.

"Have you seen Miuna and Eileen?" I asked them.

"I don't think either of them left yet!" One orc pointed to my house.

Sure enough, I went straight home and found them alive and well. Four Miunas had trapped dead imps and bone hounds in their slime bodies. Eileen was stirring the alchemy cauldron, not one bit worried that the world was going to hell outside.

"You two are something else." I sighed in relief.

"Hi, Ellori! We see you got a sexy make-over. We're just helping Eileen capture some ingredients. She said demons were rare to come by, so every part of them down to the toenails were valuable," Miuna said.

I stomped over to them, fuming at the ears. "Now isn't the time to be experimenting. Demons can break in here at any moment. You two could be seriously hurt. Get in Eudora's tower. Now!"

"No can do, Mistress. Right now, I'm helping in the only way I can— making enough potions and elixirs for the now and later. Who knows how many people will be hurt by the end of it? I can't call myself an alchemist if I'm not doing everything in my power to save them." Eileen handed me a restoration potion and stamina draught, then went back to slaving away over the cauldron. "You just focus on ending this battle as soon as possible."

"We can keep ourselves safe!" The Miunas gave me thumbs up.

"Everyone is growing up right before my eyes... Okay, I'll leave you to it then." I drank the two potions, hugged Eileen from behind which gave her a start, and returned to the battle outside.

A shower of pebble and stone pelted me as I left Ellowyn. Lantessa turned a flesh golem into stone, then whipped her tail with such force that it shattered her foe. Another tried to pummel her from behind, but it also succumbed to a statue-like state. The gorgon coiled around the golem and crushed it with her raw strength.

"Lantessa!" I shouted, glad to see holding her own despite being outnumbered.

"Ah. It's you. Where is Eudora? Why is she not here dealing with this herself?" the gorgon asked impatiently. I didn't know what face I made, but she appeared to have gotten the

answer she was looking for from my expression. "I suppose this is about right for her, leaving others to do the work in her place."

That earned a laugh from me because of how true Lantessa was. I needed that, even if I didn't know how Eudora was doing. Or if she was even alive for that matter. She sent us back knowing full well we could handle it. To hell if I was going to let her down.

"I'm going to make a break for demons within the city. Can I leave Ellowyn and the tower to you, Lantessa?" I asked.

Lantessa clicked her tongue. It might have been my imagination, but almost a dozen quieter clicks followed after. The snakes on her head looked less than pleased.

"Did you all just click your tongues at me?" I put my hands on my waist and glared.

"Yes, yes. I'll guard this side of the village." Lantessa groaned.

The sky, while still red, had but trickles of imps left. Thelia had gathered her army of demons, only half of which had survived the battle. She was no less injured herself compared to her kin.

"The number of demons pouring through the veil is thinning. I fear a greater demon will be entering the fray soon," Thelia said, flying up to me.

"Is it one of Zertos' masters?" I asked.

"No." She shook her head. "It is a—"

Three deafening howls bellowed from Lotherrain, so loud that my ears continued to ring when it ended.

"Mraaa— *hiss!*" Rio growled, his fur was standing on end.

So were mine and the erinyes'.

"Thelia... what was that?" I dared to ask.

She gulped hard. "That was a cerberus, a hound of the masters that Zertos served."