

The Granite Promenade wasn't enough to satisfy the Council of Kings' vanity. They had to build more statues in the grand vestibule along the far walls in all manner of poses. Overhead, crystalline chandeliers lit the way and cast the statues' shadows to the ground to appear as though in frozen combat. Our footsteps upon the smooth gray stone paved beneath them echoed across the empty chamber.

I didn't have fond memories of this place. Witches that graduated from the Academy came here to swear a service of allegiance to a monarch, just as I did for King Marcus of Parthun, Mira for the King of Randover, and Eudora to the emperor of High Saquin. All of whom had since perished to one woman's mad grab for power.

This palace— this entire city was on the backs of enslaved demi-humans and persecuted witches under the guise of charity to humanity. The reality was rather clear cut.

Greed. Our history, both witchcraft and humanity was carved from greed in one way or another.

"Ellori."

I paused to find Eudora no longer walking beside me. She was several paces behind, staring into my eyes.

"This is the part where you give me a monologue about how you'll sacrifice yourself to defeat Edith?" I cracked a smile.

The Cackling Witch scoffed. "Not so. I have every intention of coming out of this alive. You must know— there is a reason she did not kill me and left me trapped instead."

"I thought it was because Edith wasn't able to kill you, right? And kept you trapped until she found a way to?" I asked

"I have six out of the seven soul stones inside me. They wield immense magic in such a small, confined space. What would happen if this body was no longer keeping those souls in check?" She returned another question in the form of a lesson.

The magic would... implode.

I'd seen it before when Headmistress Anora and the other witches destroyed a soul stone of pride. It required the skill of many witches to contain the destruction it could wrought. Edith swallowed seven, and if we were to defeat her...

Then were we to not kill her?

"We may very well die along with her." Eudora nodded to herself and walked past me.

I clenched a fist in front of me and thought of my children back home. My resolve didn't waver one bit.

"Farrowghast, we have come to help." Eleanor's voice echoed down the hall. She and Noelle, along with Rio, came running in to catch up. The former knights donned their signature armor from the order but without the helmets, though both had been tarnished and charred from battle.

The flow of unnatural and foul magic coursed through them. I noticed right away they wielded their soul-bound weapon. Noelle had her levitating swords and Eleanor her dagger.

"If things had turned out differently, we would be facing each other rather than facing the same direction," I mused, clasping each of their hands.

"Mistress Eudora, I'm glad to see you're in good health!" Noelle bowed in reverence.

Despite being treated the way Noelle had, he still revered Eudora. Color me surprised.

"My obedient slave still remembers me? I'm touched," Eudora remarked amusedly.

A dagger came between their reunion. Eleanor didn't take kindly to their exchange.

"Noel is not your slave," Eleanor declared. "We meet again at last, Butcher of Saquin. This alliance is temporary. Once this is over, I will make you answer for your crimes."

"You may certainly try." She giggled into the back of her hand.

The two of them looked ready to rip each others' throats out. I shouldn't be surprised that Eleanor reacted the way she did. After all, Eudora was still a rogue witch who murdered thousands. Her crime couldn't be excused simply because she was fooled into doing so. Many lives were lost, and someone needed to be held responsible.

However, fighting each other now would only benefit one person.

"I'd like to remind everyone that our primary target is Edith Percouli and not each other." I pushed Eleanor's dagger away from Eudora's face.

The knight relented, lowering the weapon to her side but holding her glare on Eudora.

"We believe Discipline is guarding the councilor. She was nowhere to be seen leading the Order of Piety outside," Noelle explained.

"You needn't look any further. This is as far as you go," a melodic voice echoed down to us.

At the top of the stairs, before an archway leading into the inner sanctum where members of the council held court, stood Discipline, the head of the Knights of the Order of Piety. She clapped once and materialized that dreaded rapier as her hands parted.

"Giselle." Eleanor greeted her commander with a scowl. "You nearly killed me."

"Do not look so glum. You yet live. Although, perhaps not for much longer, seeing as you have no intention of standing down," Discipline sneered.

"You can't defeat all of us at once." I brandished my empowered staff.

Rio growled, preparing to pounce and take revenge for being thrown around last time.

"Perhaps not. I only need to delay you." She bowed with one arm across her chest.

Delay?

I saw the point of her rapier too late.

A sharp metallic cry rang in my ears. Eleanor deflected the projection of Discipline's rapier with her dagger.

"Go! Noel and I shall deal with our commander!" Eleanor exclaimed.

"If we're victorious up there, you two have to escape the castle. It won't be standing at the end of this," I warned.

Both of the knights nodded.

Rio, Eudora, and I flew past Discipline.

"I think not." Giselle Artoire clicked her tongue.

A dozen projections of singing steel chased after us, but once again deflected by Noelle and Eleanor's timely parries.

"When we get to Edith, same trick," I told Rio.

My familiar darted off in another direction out of sight.

The metallic clash of blades echoed loudly down the hall as we hurried to the inner sanctum. Edith awaited inside the circular chamber. A dessicated body hung from nine of the twelve balconies, upon which the sovereign lords took their place during court. At the center of the room, Edith presided over a bubbling cauldron. She held a struggling and beaten Mira, who cradled Talos in her arms, by the throat.

"You're alive..." Mira smiled at me with deep relief.

"I hope you haven't grown weary of seeing my mug again so soon," Eudora taunted.

"You just don't know when to quit." Edith turned to face us. Her face had grown youthful, though it was still tainted by demonic influence.

"Let her go!" I demanded.

The demon witch took one look at Mira and appeared to have lost all interest in her. She took the dagger from Mira's waist and plunged the blade into her abdomen. But not a moment too soon did Rio's tentacles immobilize Edith's arm. He flung her away with all his might, sending her crashing several rooms away.

Eudora and I rushed to Mira's aid. She reached up to caress my face.

"Oh, darling. If only you could show me this face more often." Mira chuckled.

I hadn't noticed my tears dripping onto her face until she wiped them away.

"Why can't you just react normally for once?" I sighed, helping Mira to her feet. She clutched a piece of fabric and pressed it to my chest. It began to reform into my robes, consuming the clothes I was already wearing.

"Managed to snatch it off her before Rio sent her flying," she said.

A torrent of magic flowed through me. Vessyra's magic. With the living robes serving as a conduit and sponge between us, I could once again tap into her wealth of power.

"What happened here?" Eudora asked, on her toes and glancing into the cauldron. "Why is the cauldron active?"

"She's trying to synthesize a philosopher's stone to create an elixir of immortality," Mira answered.

The three of them tipped the cauldron over, spilling the contents to the ground. The alchemical liquids burned a deep hole into the floor.

"Ew. Good thing I didn't think to drink that." Eudora grimaced.

"It doesn't matter. The process can be restarted, and the three of you will serve as fuel for the cauldron." Edith emerged from the rubble, dressed in her black gown empowered by the trickster god Demos.

"No sending us away this time, Eudora. We're fighting this together," I said, myself donning the white vestments of Vessyra.