

I slowly raised my hands, trying to seem as non-threatening as possible as it was for this shape to be, especially in the dark. I realized by their expressions I was failing, and hard. We didn't have time for this, but I also didn't want to draw undue attention to myself. I could tell that one of them was already stealing glances to the left and right, trying to find a way out. There was no doubt he'd sound the alarm as soon as he was free.

"I'm not going to hurt you," I tried, keeping my voice as low and as level as possible. It was the best I could do in the moment, and I was worried for a moment that might have sounded almost seductive. Not that they were convinced -- or seduced, for that matter -- in the least. The one who had asked me who I was had finally had the presence of mind to raise his weapon. He seemed to be the smartest of the two. The other still held his as if he'd forgotten he had it.

Or, it turned out, he wasn't intending on using it. He dropped his polearm and made a run for it, turning away from me and almost falling over in a mad scramble to get away. I was still trying to figure out what I could, should do in that situation, when Sally landed in front of him with a loud thud. It was a perfect three-point superhero-landing. Her wings were spread wide, and her grin was giving them a run for their money. Now the guard *did* trip, but scrambled to his feet quickly. I could hear him muttering to himself but Sally gave him a right hook that was hard enough to send him spinning. I was surprised his helmet didn't spin around separately. He landed on the ground with a soft gurgle and a thud. Clearly, Sally wasn't just sturdier than the average person anymore.

The other swung his weapon between the two of us. My assurance that he wouldn't be harmed felt hollow now, especially when I saw Kazumi slither down the building silently as a... well, y'know. He never heard her come up behind him and suddenly she had him in a headlock, a slender arm around his neck. She hissed softly -- or perhaps she shushed him? -- as she held him down. His eyes drifted closed after a minute. Kazumi looked at me sheepishly. I shrugged and smiled at her. I wasn't going to judge her for knowing how to handle herself. Sally just put a foot on her conquest triumphantly and Kazumi and I both rolled our eyes.

That was why the explosion that hit me came so out of the blue. It hit me hard, and actually knocked the wind out of me. Sailing through the air, I tried to get my bearings, and slammed into the heavy doors of the workhouse. With a crash, I shattered the lock and one of the two doors. I tried to get up as quickly as possible and saw that the person who had attacked me was a young woman. A small patrol of the night watch had come around the corner, I now realized. Maybe this had been standard procedure, or perhaps rumours of my arrival had necessitated this precaution, but with them was a young mage, and she looked terrified. Her hands and mouth still glowed with the words of fire she'd spoken.

In reflex, I unfurled myself to the full, spreading my wings. I'd always felt more powerful like this, so it stood to reason I'd be better suited to protect myself and others if need be. Not that this turned out to be necessary in the slightest. The Mage wasn't going to be casting much of anything for the foreseeable future. Sally was on the patrol like a fury, swinging wildly, making up for her lack of elegance with enthusiasm and what I could only imagine was

demonic strength. Her fists dented armor -- and face -- like it was nothing. If it hadn't been for the fireball, this would have been a quiet escape. She'd gone through them like a knife through butter. But in nearby windows we saw lanterns being lit. We had to get out of here, right n--

"You're her, aren't you?" I heard a soft voice behind me. I turned around. A young Gnoll girl wearing one of the collars, stood in front of a small crowd. She was so young, *much* too young, and I felt my heart break for them. Two Kobold, older but roughly the same height as her, stood protectively next to her, as if they were going to fight me if I tried to harm the child.

"You've... you've really come for us?" one of them said incredulously. And then they saw the defeated guards behind us, and then Sally, the young Succubus, and a Lamia dressed in fine clothing standing over the body of one of their guards. Then they looked up at me and I could only wonder about the image that was reflected in their eyes: a still-smouldering giantess, a Demon Queen, who was here to save them. Considering where they were, I would grab on to a hope like that and never let go.

A large centaur, tan and muscular, stepped forward. He was scarred heavily, and more than a few of his scars looked like the type one might get from being, say, lashed or whipped, and I gritted my teeth. He had the air of a leader about him, helped by the fact that he came almost face to face with me.

"Thank you," he simply said, and then turned to the people gathered. I still hadn't said anything. I didn't know what to say. "Everyone," he said, "you know where to meet up. You know where to take the children. Two days. Calvert, Eden, tell the others the signal is now." When his last words were spoken, two Kenku ran out of the building, spread their wings and flew off. I was baffled with how quickly the man had taken control of the situation. The rest of the indentured spilled out of the building like a tidal wave, but most of them walking past me looked up to me with a mixture of fear and adoration. It was a horrible feeling.

Several groups of them stayed just outside the door, but most of them made a beeline for it under the cover of night, the younger ones being carried by the larger creatures. The Centaur approached me.

"Thank you again. You *are* the Demon Queen, aren't you?"

I nodded.

"Did you really come here to save us?" he asked, as Sally and Kazumi came up to us both. They looked worried and confused, and I shared that sentiment. I was trying to come up with a response when he chuckled softly to himself. "Didn't think so. Regardless..." He looked around at the now-empty cots, and the small group that had picked up the weapons from the patrol. "The dog's off the leash now, your Highness. If that door," he motioned, "had stayed intact, there would've been no consequences. You've forced our hand now. In two days, those of us," and he paused dramatically, "*all* of us who can carry a weapon will march on the capital."

I gulped. I'd clearly accelerated something that had been some time in the making. Wydonia, still fragile after the reunification, was clearly already on the brink of collapse. We had to move even faster now. The appropriate response seemed to be to nod to him.

"You should leave, your Highness. Soon, there will be guards here, and talk of your presence in the midlands has everyone on edge."

"What will you do?" I finally asked. He didn't seem like he was planning on running and hiding any time soon. As we talked, he walked over to one of the bunk beds and lifted the mattress effortlessly, retrieving a glaive from underneath. He carried it with a practiced confidence that was unnerving as he walked back towards us.

"I have some people to visit," he said with ice in his voice, and I looked to Sally and Kazumi. I wondered briefly if my splash through their front door had just unleashed a tidal wave of violence on the surrounding lands, or if this had been a powder keg waiting for a spark. Regardless of the mixed metaphors, it was hard to hold his resentment against him. He'd been treated like property, at best. Standing in the way of that would be... wrong.

I looked him in the eyes. He was clearly trying to get a measure of me. It was likely he was waiting for me to say or do something, maybe try to stop him. I didn't doubt for a second if I tried he'd charge me without a second's hesitation. I raised my hand. "Good luck," I said, and he shook my hand with a smile, before trotting out of the building and meeting up with the others. They were remarkably quiet when they left, but the way their weapons glittered in the moonlight told me that some of the more privileged in the area wouldn't survive the night. A large part of me felt truly terrible about the upcoming bloodshed. Kazumi could tell and touched my arm softly.

"Retribution is necessary sometimes," she said. I could tell she wasn't nearly as conflicted as I was, but she understood where I came from, at least. I looked back into the street and heard shouting in the distance.

"Crap," I said, and slipped the magic stone around my neck. Kazumi and Sally did the same, and we snuck into an alley. Several guards came running past, holding torches and weapons, and then there was more shouting as they were overpowered and then suddenly there was another posse of indentured with weapons. We heard more shouting, and then something went *boom* in the distance and we started running. We had no idea how long it would take, but we all knew that soon, this town would be, proverbially and possibly literally, on fire. Behind us, we saw the cloudy night sky flicker with the warm glow of burning buildings. I'd unleashed years of anger and resentment, and the consequences were mine, now.

"At least," Sally said as we ran through back-alleys back towards the inn, "we won't have to worry about horses."

“What do you mean?” I asked as we arrived at the door. Not bothering with stealth or subtlety anymore, Sally just walked in and Kazumi and myself followed. The innkeep seemed baffled by the fact that we came from outside instead of our rooms. He started to say something, but Sally just pointed at him and he got quiet, baffled by the brusqueness of the gesture. Then he heard the noise from outside and he stopped caring altogether.

“Well,” she said as we climbed the stairs. “I figure we can just steal some. I doubt anyone will notice in all this chaos.” She rolled her eyes when Kazumi and I both shot her a glance. “Oh, don’t look at me like that. You’re the one who wanted to play the hero. Now we need to go.” She paused. “Or are you planning on leading an entire rebellion from here on out? March on the capital?” I shook my head fervently. “Exactly,” she said, and ran into the room and quickly came back out with her pack. “I’ll find us some horses.”

When we came back outside, we found Sally leading three horses towards us. If someone was shouting for us to stop, it was drowned out by all the other shouting around us. The whole town was awake now, and we had to leave as quickly as we could as it was. We mounted them. I was happy to find that the stone that made me smaller made me lighter as well. I only realized that things could have turned out very bad for the horse if it hadn’t *after* I’d landed in the saddle.

We rode as fast as we could towards the capital, and when I looked behind me, I saw that not only was the town a chaotic mess, but in the surrounding countryside, several farms and fields were also ablaze, setting the night on fire, casting our escape in an eerily warm light. We were running out of time.