

Chapter 139: A Devastation of Demons

“How is your wrath?” I asked Joisse once the others had retired for the night.

“A lot better,” she smiled softly. “Thanks for taking a chance on me, but...”

“But?” I raised an eyebrow.

“But... one of these days, it’s not going to work out. Someone’s going to take your trust and give you a magicked blade between the ribs in return. And they might succeed where Vivian failed.”

I wished I had a fire to stare into as I avoided Joisse’s wide, red eyes. “What brought this about.”

“I’ve been thinking about Vivian lately, even though I never really met her. You nearly died for trusting her. Then there’s your former teacher, your sister, and even the King of Edath. And now Brynna.”

“Do you think she’s going to try to kill me?” I asked in disbelief.

To my relief, Joisse shook her head. “No, I don’t. But...”

“But I trusted her too easily?”

Joisse nodded.

“You know I don’t trust the King of Linthel, right?”

She nodded again. “But you listened to him. And you’re considering him anyway. I know that if you hadn’t taken a chance on me, I wouldn’t be here, but I’m worried you’re too motherly for your own good sometimes, M—Zarena.”

Joisse’s stumble didn’t slip by me and I almost choked. When I glanced down, she was looking away, flush with embarrassment. “Mmm?” I asked.

The other wrath demon shook her head rapidly, then whispered forcefully. “You remind me of her is all, okay.”

“Did she...” I trailed off.

“Gave my dad one too many chances.” She breathed deep, barely keeping her anger in check. “I’d wondered why, out of all the deaths that day that made me... why a teenage girl was the biggest fragment. The one most wholly consumed by rage.”

Suddenly, my eyes felt wet, and for a moment, the silent forest fell away. “I’m sorry, Joisse. I wish—”

Joisse lunged at me, but not in an attack. Her arms circled my waist, and she buried her head against my chest as she started to sob. “I... remember a lot more now. It’s not so clouded and it—it *hurts!* There’s so much I wish I’d done differently. So much I wish I could go back and undo.

“He died in the war,” her voice changed to a growl. “I couldn’t even sink my claws into him—do to him what he did to Mom!”

“Shhh,” I rubbed the top of Joisse’s hair softly with one clawed hand, holding her with the others. My tail came and wrapped both of us against the chill night wind. “Let it all out.”

Joisse's words turned to babbling as she sobbed openly. I found myself at a loss. She was sixteen or so when she'd died, right on the cusp of adulthood. Technically, she was twenty-something now, but did that time really count? I didn't consider myself to be almost thirty, even though that was the time that had passed since my birth as a human. Five of those years really didn't count.

Alerted by Joisse's sobs, Seyari stuck her head out of our tent, alert and worried. I freed one hand and held one clawed finger up to my lips. Kartania poked her head out next, and her mouth slipped open slightly when she saw me holding Joisse, who'd since lost her human form, as she bawled into me. Nelys and Taava glanced out from their tents as well, quickly darting back inside with embarrassed looks.

Privacy was hard to come by out here, but I was happy my friends understood the time Joisse needed.

But time alone wouldn't heal this. *She needs a family. Even if it's just a year or so—just enough to cap off a childhood butchered and cut short with something other than pain and emptiness.*

Looking down at her, I ran my hand soothingly along some of the spikes that adorned her hunched back. Yes, she was a wrath demon, and one of mine in that sense, but I that wouldn't be enough.

Did the contract with Nelys spur this on? Was it really just a similarity between me and her late mother?

Do I even need to know?

It took a while for Joisse to finish crying. I wanted to ask her about what we'd both danced around, but she'd fallen fast asleep while clinging to me with a grip that could probably tear a wall down. My only regret that night as I watched the stars and the quiet forest both was that I didn't know if I'd made the right choice.

With her or Nelys.

Am I just digging more graves?

"What's the proper term for a group of demons?" I asked my sister.

"What?" She glanced at me only briefly, then went back to scanning the direction we'd come from.

After a tense night, and a blissful revelation that my legs were incapable of falling asleep even with a hundred odd kilograms of demon on them, we'd packed up quickly and begun our trip at dawn.

Thankfully, Brynna hadn't tried to run off, but the lupael looked far from comfortable around us. I would be too, if I had just survived a coalition of corrupt Church and demons. Dense as I was sometimes, it was an acute awareness of this density and its limitations that allowed me to understand that asking her about it right now would be a bad idea.

And speaking of bad ideas: bringing up what happened last night with Joisse. She was sulking and avoiding me ever since the others arose, and I had absolutely no intention to mortify her by bringing up what we talked about in front of everyone while we were walking quickly back to Linthel

I just hope we can get some time to talk soon.

So, out of other, wiser ideas, I continued my plan to bug my sister and thus show her human side to Brynna. “Well, wasn’t there that scholar from a few decades ago who invented a bunch of names for groups of animals? Like a murder of crows.”

“I don’t think there is one for demons, Zarena.”

“Well why not?” I placed my lower hands on my hips.

Taava snickered, and my demonic hearing picked up a small hiss of breath from Seyari.

“Because it’s a stupid, useless idea.”

“How about a devastation then?” I offered. “A devastation of demons.”

“Sister...” Kartania warned.

“I like it...” Nelys muttered

I smirked at that. “What about the rest of you?”

“No comment,” Seyari answered first, struggling not to grin.

Taava shrugged. “I think a dance a demons would be funnier, but sure.”

Joissee took a moment to answer. “It sounds... violent.”

“How about you, Brynna?” I asked, hoping to break the ice.

The lupael startled, her ears twitching, but she kept her eyes on the snow-covered trail in front of her. “It’s... fine. Accurate, even. I don’t... I don’t want to think about that right now.”

Shit—I messed up. “Sorry—I really am. Bringing this up was in bad taste.”

Brynna shook her head. “Don’t keep saying sorry. Just stop doing it. And it isn’t like everyone’s dead—well, not yet I hope.”

“Would you like to apprise us of the situation?” Kartania probed. “If not, you are welcome to part ways with us in Linthel. But you must know that, even anonymously, we *must* report this.”

“We were going to leave for Astrye in just a few days, actually,” I added.

Seyari offered a cold smile to the lupael’s downturned chin. “You know what our goal is.”

“And like Zarena said, you can join us if you want!” Nelys finished.

“Or don’t,” Taava quipped. “Zarena’s got a terrible sense of humor!”

“It’s better than yours!” I snapped.

Taava gasped. “You dare!”

“I do!” I stuck my tongue out.

Brynna looked up just enough to offer a tired smile under reddened, puffy eyes. “I appreciate the effort, but I would appreciate silence more.”

I winced and almost apologized again. As I turned back to the trail ahead, my eyes swept past Joisse. She quickly hid a small smile and my heart warmed.

Daughter. Gods, I'm too young for this... Probably? I absolutely must ask Seyari first.

The sun had changed to shades of orange and red when we arrived back in Linthel. At one point during the march back, I wondered why I didn't just damn the consequences and fly into the city on wings of fire.

The answer was the safety of my friends. Competent or not, if anything had chased us—and we were all surprised nothing seemed to have done so—my strength would be a major deterrent. The fact we hadn't needed it worried me. It worried all of us.

A group of lesser demons like that *needed* some kind of greater demon or binding spell or *something* to keep them together for longer than a quick chase. It didn't make sense for whatever it was to be far away.

After Joisse's comments about trust, I found myself, against all good judgment, nearly casting my own suspicion over Brynna. The woman, according to both Seyari and Kartania, was earnest, if reticent. She had an aura as well—fire, and weak. Enough to have warmed her limbs for the run, but little more.

The moment we'd entered the city, she'd asked to leave. I told her we were Gelles Company and we were staying at the Knight's Rest. Aside from my sister, obviously, and Joisse whom we had not yet inducted, that much was true.

Honestly, I wasn't sure if we'd see Brynna again. I was fairly certain, however, that letting her go wouldn't bite us in the collective ass. Kartania left as well, citing the need to gather materials and inform those in the Church she could trust. From the set of her jaw, I guessed that was a very short list.

For the rest of us, our first order of business was to report to the Gelles Company, and our second order of business was to report to the local lord, or *king* in this case. Technically, we were doing it out of order.

Technically, King Carvalon could also bite my big crimson ass. Maybe we can get the company to report to him? An excuse could easily be that we wanted to make less of a scene.

Same goals or no, the King of Edath and I were *nothing* alike. For one, he was blond; my hair was black.

Several petty internal jokes later, we arrived at the company. I shed my human guise once we walked in, to Seyari's disappointment and Taava's great amusement. A short shouting contest later, and we were shown to Arden's office with *remarkable* haste.

"Miss Miller," the Linthel branch leader said with enough forced patience to turn an hour to sixty-one minutes, "why did you feel the need to cause a scene?"

I dropped my smile. "Big news from Astrye and other southern regions: there's a demon-worshipping cult headed by Finley and other former inquisitors who were part of the demon cult there and they've taken the place over."

I felt Arden's remarkably well-hidden, roaring fury *shift*. "Elaborate."

“We went a day and a half south of the city to train as a group, when we encountered a lupael woman by the name of Brynna who was running from an unnaturally well-coordinated group of lesser wrath demons. The pack did not submit to me as they should have, but that may have been a pack mentality. We slew them to the last and brought Brynna safely back to the city after she told us what happened in Astrye.

“We suspect there was someone or something nearby controlling them, but as best we could tell, we were not followed. Although it is unlikely whatever sent them doesn’t know where a big city like Linthel is—Sir.”

Arden nodded. “Where is this Brynna woman now?”

“We let her go once we entered the city, Sir. She knows where we are staying, knows we are reporting this to you, and we had no reasonable authority to force her to come with us.”

Arden grunted disapproval. “How do you know she wasn’t lying? You said someone had to be controlling the demons.”

“The thought did cross my mind, Sir, but—”

“Let me handle this,” Seyari interrupted. “Sir, I am trained in the discernment of lies as a half-angel. I was able to, to the best of my understanding, read Brynna easily. She was not deceiving us, although she did not trust us, likely because we are a coalition of both angelic and demonic elements.”

“I... see. You lot seem to have done everything correctly. How many lesser demons did you say there were?”

“Approximately three dozen, Sir,” I answered.

“Thirty-four,” Nelys said, speaking up for the first time. They wore their company uniform, altered slightly by Taava, and displayed their skirt of tentacles.

Arden’s eyes stuck on them for a moment. “Forty-one...” he muttered, shaking his head. “If you don’t mind—”

“Zarena is a powerful demon and my friend, Sir. I convinced her to grant me a some of her power so I could be stronger in a fight.”

Arden blinked. “Why tentacles, though.”

“Why not?”

The branch leader opened his mouth, closed it, then shook his head and sighed. “It’s not like all this is against any laws. Mostly, I suspect it is because these sorts of things are *assumed* to be tools of evil.” He glared pointedly at me.

“Hey, I’m not going to disagree! Usually doesn’t mean all the time.”

Arden sighed again, longer this time. “Do you have any additional information or requests? I need to make a report on this and inform all who need to know without causing a panic like you just did downstairs.”

I opened my mouth for a quip.

“Don’t.” Arden cut me off before I could begin. “Just... don’t.”

Instead I coughed into one of my hands, fidgeting with the lower pair in my lap. “Right then. Could you inform King Carvalon on our behalf?”

“Did you not already tell his guard?”

“We came straight here.”

“Interesting. Well, we were going to inform him first anyway, so there’s no real harm done.”

I nodded sharply.

“Now please, get out.”

I stood, and we all got out.

Taava, who had been silent the whole time, gave a wave and a wink as she closed the office door. “That was fun, Boss! Ya should do more things like that!”

I rolled my eyes, then stopped. “Actually...”

“Renna, no,” Seyari said forcefully.

“Renna yes,” I replied with a wickedly sharp grin.

“Do you want to sleep on the floor tonight?”

I thought about it.

“I’m not in the mood, so it won’t turn into anything.”

“Okay, you win,” I groused, defeated.

“Good, now disguise back on.”

“But they already know I’m a demon!”

“Yes.”

I pouted, but did as my fiancée asked, to a background of snickers and giggles from Nelys and Taava. *Bully the demon. Very funny.*

We gathered up Joisse from the lobby, who looked immensely relieved to be out from under a tide of people asking questions.

“I should’ve gone back to the inn,” she mumbled.

“You kept your anger in check, though,” I noted proudly.

“I... that wasn’t you?”

I smiled. “I didn’t lift a finger. Good job, Joisse.”

She beamed under my praise, then stiffened and turned away. "Right. Thanks, Renna."

I withdrew my hand from almost ruffling her hair. *Not yet.*

"We may still have time to see your smith friend," Seyari said as we exited the company building. "Pity we didn't have time to get you fitted for a new jacket."

I shrugged, poking at some of the holes in my uniform. "Unless it's enchanted, it won't hold up anyway. I don't get whatever kind of cheating Lilly gets. Besides, I'm my own heater."

"Aw, don't be so glum," Taava chirped. "You're *all* our heater!"