

## Chapter 751 Remnants

Aryvia felt the wagon rumble over the road southwards. She supposed the gold they had was spent on more important things than comfortable transportation. She did have it better than the chained up slaves sitting on the floor a few meters away.

She gave them a look and sighed. *Poor things. Waste too, some of them look workable.*

“Shame,” one of her travel companions said, following her gaze.

“It’s what we have left,” she said. The plan was simple enough, but they required blood. As much as they could get.

“We’re here!” someone shouted from outside.

*Already.* Aryvia moved out behind the other hooded figures in the cart. The sunlight blinded her as she landed on the ground. *Trees?* They had stopped on a clearing in the middle of a small patch of forest. She wasn’t particularly familiar with the southern Plains but this didn’t look at all like Morhill, or anywhere close to it.

“Why aren’t we getting closer?” she asked one of the higher leveled mages.

The man turned her way. “Sentinel scouts.”

“What do you mean? So far out? I can barely make out the mountains,” she said. *What are we even doing so far away.*

“We will hound them southwards,” the man said.

“Kind of defeats the point with causing chaos. If we’re just running alongside a bunch of demons towards their walls,” she said.

“I didn’t make the plan, alright?” the man said. “Grovo decided we’re stopping here, so we’re stopping here. Plus we’re not the only ones, not by a long shot. Dozens of cells will conduct their rituals and summonings. High chance we won’t even be noticed until we reach the city walls.”

“Then why not go closer now, if there’s chaos already?” Aryvia asked.

The man nodded. “Hold on, you’re right. Well I’m sure Grovo considered it. He’s not an imbecile.”

“Maybe you could bring it up with the man himself?” she suggested.

“Me? No. Bad idea. Last time someone made a suggestion they were fed to his pet demons. You can try if you want to,” he said, crossing his arms.

“I’m getting a bad feeling about this,” she said.

The man chuckled. “Largest operation the Red Blades have ever managed. This is our time to shine. Every influential figure in the Plains is watching.”

“Right,” Aryvia said. “Shouldn’t that be even more concerning? There will be some insanely powerful people amongst the crowd. Then you have the Sentinels, Shadows, Lilith herself.”

He scoffed. “You don’t really believe in those fairy tales, do you? Lilith is just made up by the Empire. She doesn’t exist. And Lys is on its last legs, considering deals with Ravenhall of all places. Just a demon destroyed ruin in the mountains.”

Aryvia raised her brows. She wasn’t so sure the man was right, but then it wouldn’t be the first time her information had proven wrong. Maybe this was one of those cases.

She watched the mages prepare the ritual. They formed a massive circular stone platform before they crouched down and started their rune etching work. It would take some time. Aryvia turned away when they started killing slaves to fill in the runes with blood. She just didn’t enjoy violence like some others in their organization. According to the screams and laughter, some were downright reveling in the process.

She didn’t mind it much. Since Baralia had fallen, their traditions were far more difficult to conduct. Slaves were harder to find and buy, they were more expensive, and their vitality left a lot to be desired. She had her own fun a few times but her preferences had little use in summoning or blood magic. Crossing her arms, she looked towards the distant mountains.

“That’ll be a long way. Can you control the demons for the entire distance?” she asked the same mage she had talked to before.

“Probably not. But they keep on running once they choose a direction,” the man said.

*What happened to our well planned out rituals back home?* She sighed.

“Can you be a little more positive?” he asked, a slave screaming behind them before she was silenced. “Maybe smile a little, or put the hood up so that we don’t have to see your frown.”

“I just like our cave more,” she said. “Doesn’t feel like we’re as prepared as we could be.”

“Well well well, Miss Aryvia knows best. I’m sure you could’ve done a better job in the little time we had since this thing was even announced. Weeks of travel, a wonderful ritual circle, live sacrifices, even hostages,” he said, spreading both arms. “It is how it is. Can’t always be a perfect fucking operation.”

She sighed and rubbed her temples. “Yes yes. I know. I’m sorry. I’ll be more positive.”

“Good. Before Grovo sees you. He’s in a foul mood,” the mage said.

“Isn’t he always?” another man said as he approached. “We.. eh... need some blood from you two as well. Not enough slaves if we want to keep some hostages.”

Aryvia groaned, the mage giving her a glare. “Alright. Sure. Yes. Blood,” she said and showed him an incredibly forced smile. She got out a ritual dagger and started slicing into her arm, hissing at the pain. She hated providing blood herself. That’s what they had slaves for. *Damn the fucking Empire and their backwards laws. All our cities will be overpopulated soon enough.*

“Where do you want the blood?” she asked.

A hooded figure appeared next to her with a cauldron. He huffed before he set the thing down. “Heavy,” he said and laughed.

She nodded. “Yeah. You know you don’t have to use a cauldron.” Aryvia held her arm out over the thing and looked away. The feeling of her own blood rolling down her arm was enough. She didn’t have to see it.

“I’ve had the best results with cauldrons. I know it’s not proven or anything but if you read the old scriptures of Benjamin Greyson, he clearly has a preference for the unwieldy containers. I saw the word cauldron sixteen times in the three hundred pages of his first book,” the man explained.

“Look Davis, I don’t care,” she said.

“Right... right,” he murmured. “More one for... sexual theories.”

She glared at him.

“Sorry,” he said and turned away slightly.

Grovo appeared in the center of the ritual circle, crouching down next to one of the corpses before he put his hands into the deep wound on their neck.

Aryvia looked away. *Disgusting.*

He walked over and smeared the blood into his hair before he took in a deep breath and smiled.

“What a wonderful day for a summoning! Don’t you think?” he looked at the two of them.

“Yes, indeed. A great day, Grovo,” Davis said.

“Wonderful day,” Aryvia repeated.

He tapped her shoulder with his bloodied finger. “I don’t hear the enthusiasm. Look, I know the journey was long... and arduous... poor Jester... didn’t stand a chance. I still hear his screams sometimes when I sleep,” he said and pointed at his head. “Anyway. Just pull yourselves together, for me, for everyone, alright? It’ll be worth it. And we can go drink together later, maybe even an orgy,” he said and pointed at them with both his index fingers and a charming smile.

Aryvia smiled back. He did have a way to get to them. Maybe that or it was the unspoken threat of being skinned alive. His sudden outbursts were well known among their group. It was just one of those things one had to deal with. He wasn’t the worst team leader she’s had. And she had to admit that the parties he organized were really quite something.

One of the mages appeared nearby and whispered something to Grovo.

The man in question clapped his hands. “Alright then, hurry up everyone! And keep those knives on the hostages. We might get company sooner than expected.” A wide grin spread on his face as he took off his robe and shirt, dozens of scars visible on his torso, with the occasional tattoo in between.

*Let’s get this over with and go back home. I’m tired.*

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Ilea watched Kyrian finish his ritual circle, power vibrating through the arena as the barriers struggled to keep his magic contained.

Pierce sagged down to one knee, spitting out blood as another flail came her way. She wouldn't last much longer.

"Lilith," Wayland said as he appeared next to her.

"*What is it?*" she asked, establishing a telepathic connection.

"*Cult in a forested patch northwards. Mid scale summoning ritual. Demonic. Hostages prevent us from moving in effectively, levels unknown. City on high alert due to it being a potential distraction,*" he answered.

Pierce was flung aside, her armor dented in and reforming as she stumbled in the powerful curse. She laughed like a maniac, charging the floating form of Kyrian with an appearing blade of lightning.

"*How likely is a ritual or attack right here?*" Ilea asked.

"*Unlikely, but I won't disregard the possibility. It could be one of the groups we cleared out before the festivities started. There were leads that suggested more connections. An attack from anyone here would be nothing less than a declaration of war. Based on the information I have I deem that highly unlikely,*" Wayland explained.

"*Where exactly?*" Ilea asked. "*Call me through the mark if anything happens here.*"

"*Only in an emergency situation,*" he said. "*Follow the Shadow.*"

Ilea found the man in question and vanished.

The shadow was masked and hooded, giving her a slight nod before he jumped up, flying with wings of dark energy.

She followed.

The two stayed low on the ground, quickly moving down the side of the mountains and out onto the Plains. She spotted a ground of Sentinels flying in the air, two with dark wings, one being carried, and a fourth one with what looked like wings of ice.

The Shadow didn't slow down, circling around before coming to a stop on a small hill overlooking a small forest. "They're in there. At least twenty three people. The likely leader is a shirtless fellow. We found them too late to stop the killings. I believe they spotted one of our scouts and are now continuing with the threat of killing the hostages."

Ilea sighed. *Can't escape the lunatics.* "Why are they even here?"

"Excuse me?" the shadow asked.

She looked at him but just shook her head. "Can't people just... not sacrifice slaves or something?"

He nodded slowly. "It would be... preferable. Yes."

"Alright. Tell me exactly where you saw the hostages. I'll take care of it." Ilea cracked her neck and formed a few ashen copies. "Let's get back before the finals."

The Shadow nodded slowly, looking at the ashen forms.

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Aryvia watched the mages work. She smiled when the ritual thrummed to life. It was always an exciting moment when the runes aligned. This thing was far bigger than what they usually did as well. *They won't know what hit them.*

The very fabric of reality screeched as the blood magic took hold, a connection with the demonic realm established in mere moments. She watched the sphere of dark red energy float up as the first demons came out. Their mages used their mind magic and necromancy spells to push them towards the distant mountains.

The sight sent shivers down Aryvia's spine, the sheer savagery of these creatures, the death and chaos they would cause. There was little else in life that came close to this sensation.

The ritual came to a crescendo as the sphere grew larger. Birthed from it and slapping to the stone platform came a creature so massive and vile, the stench alone sent Aryvia reeling. She watched as it loomed forward on a dozen long legs, its torso a collection of claws and teeth.

Mages shouted as their efforts focused entirely on the beast, pushing it forward and towards the mountains.

She felt the power emanate from it and shivered. *If it breaks free...*

***[Slithering Claw Demon – lvl ???]***

*A three mark*, she thought and forced herself to stand her ground. The others wouldn't let her live it down if she ran.

The creature turned towards the mages but then whipped its torso forward and rushed into the underbrush, far faster than she had ever seen anything move. Out and towards the mountains.

She breathed out, feeling her heart beat in her chest, sweat on her brow.

Grovo stood on the platform and laughed, the last bits of blood magic dissipating as a rain of red drops fell on his naked chest.

"The hostages!" someone shouted with a panicked voice.

Aryvia turned, annoyed that someone would interrupt this perfect moment. She raised her brows when she saw all the hostages gone, the people who had held them looking around with confused and panicked expressions, their weapons still drawn.

She turned and saw the corpses on the platform gone as well. *What.*

Grovo looked around with a grin on his face and blades of blood forming on his hands. "Everyone—"

Something black flew past, a mist of blood and bones flying up and out from where Grovo had stood. The wind hit Aryvia a moment later, drops of blood and bits of flesh splattering against her face as her eyes widened. She staggered back and looked at the still black winged form, horns of ash on the intruder's head.

The figure slowly stood up from their crouch, wings spreading out behind her back, flapping once to discard the bits of flesh still stuck to them.

“*Lay down your weapons. Lie down on the floor and please... for all that is holy, don't try to talk,*” a female voice resounded in her head.

Grovo. Realization hit. *But the demons. Why...*

She watched on as most of her allies charged the ashen form.

“*Your choice,*” the woman said again, deflecting three simultaneous blows before she struck back with lightning fast punches, bones snapping and faces cracking inwards. She kicked through the leg of one charging warrior before she turned his blade around and stabbed it through his hooded head. Bolts, mist, and explosions of blood magic crashed against her armor, the ashen form neither staggering nor stopping as she looked around.

She raised her arms before every mage who had sent out an attack vanished and appeared in a group before her. The being brought their arms down as an invisible force slammed down from above, everyone in the group breaking against the ground as if they had fallen from a cliff. Screams resounded and were silenced, bodies downright exploding when the brunt of the force slammed into their forms. A mist of white flame spread out over the bodies, burning away in mere moments what was left of their corpses.

One mage had survived, her leg flattened as she crawled away. She glanced back to see the slow moving ash creature approach. It grabbed her good leg and flung her screaming form against a tree, the sound silenced instantly.

The being stopped and looked around at the few survivors, Aryvia one of them. She twitched when the blue eyes moved over her. *Run.*

She teleported away and started running through the forest, uncaring as to the direction. Her entire body moved with a primal fear she had only felt a few times in her life. Sounds of battle came from behind, silenced mere seconds later. The trees made way for a meadow, Aryvia not daring to look back as she rushed up the small hill and teleported again. She slowed down when she saw the demons running a hundred meters ahead, towards the mountains.

A figure clad in black armor and a layer of ice landed onto one of the creatures, glittering claws ripping off the creature's head before they moved on to the next enemy.

More of them were around, some flying, some on the ground, each taking out demons faster than she could even make them out. The clawed demon they had summoned was at the center of it all, screeching as the dark figures moved around it, deep wounds already visible in its sides. Most of its legs had been cut away.

Aryvia's lips quivered as she watched the figures teleport and fly past the large creature, slicing it apart as if it was a mere wolf in the wilderness. *The stories...*

She heard a noise behind and turned. Bolts of blood magic formed in front of her as she staggered back, looking at the ashen being. It had the same form as the one she had seen before, but something wasn't right.

It's eyes were entirely black.

“What are you?” she demanded, shooting her bolts forward at the waiting creature.

The thing dodged to the right with a strange floating motion, rushing forward before it gripped her neck and turned.

Aryvia saw her shoulder from a strange angle, the world turning as she fell, her vision going dark.

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Ilea landed near the last of the cult members, already killed by one of her copies. She had instructed them to keep track of those who ran, attacking if they remained hostile. The impacts in the grass and collected blood suggested the woman had done exactly that. She looked at the body and dissolved her copy, setting the ash aflame and moving it on top of the corpse. Ilea kept it there until nothing was left, watching her Sentinels rip through the small group of demons sent out to attack Morhill.

*I hope that was the last of them.* The only good thing about this situation was the fact that they could rescue a group of hostages. Former slaves from Baralia. *Maybe I should go visit at some point. Help the Empire enforce its rules.* She grit her teeth and sighed. *No. That's not my job. And before long I'll be breaking down doors of innocent people based on incomplete information. Maybe just Wayland and his information network. He could provide high value targets, if any remain after this mess.*