

Legacy of the Hidden Clans

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CHAPTER ONE

Exile

The night was an abyss of black, the sky a void punctuated only by a full, cold moon that cast its spectral light upon the land. Winter's breath howled through the trees, its icy tendrils seizing everything in its path. Beneath the chilling winds, two cloaked figures pressed forward, their steps laborious in the thick, heavy snow. Behind them, the distant but relentless sound of an enraged mob echoed, a school of flaming torches bobbing like fireflies in the darkness.

The figures, a man and a woman, veered off the path and into the foreboding woods, the dense trees shrouding them in deeper shadows. The forest seemed alive, its ancient pines creaking as if whispering warnings to the fleeing pair. But there was no time to listen. The cries of their pursuers grew louder, closer—hungry.

Suddenly, a deafening bang shattered the night air, reverberating through the trees like the crack of a giant's whip. The infants in their arms—twins, a boy and a girl—awoke with shrill cries that cut through the silence. The woman, Zari, pressed her lips against the children's foreheads, hushing them as best she could. The man, Vista, tightened his grip on his staff, his eyes scanning the darkness for threats.

The torches behind them flared brighter, their glow now penetrating the wood's edge. Zari, her heart hammering, pulled back her hood, revealing a cascade of long red hair streaked with platinum. Vista followed suit, his wild, curly hair whipped by the wind, his tan face set in grim determination. Both their faces were streaked with snow and tears, their breaths coming in visible puffs in the cold air.

Zari looked up at Vista, her voice barely a whisper. "What fate have we consigned our children to, Vista? Will they survive this night?"

Vista met her gaze, his brown eyes fierce with resolve. "They will survive, Zari. But they must do so without us. We will shield them, no matter the cost."

Vista handed his son, Kael, to Zari, who now held both children close. With a final, sorrowful look at his family, Vista turned back toward the approaching mob, gripping his staff tightly.

"I will hold them off," he said, his voice strong, though his heart was breaking. He sprinted into the night, disappearing into the shadows as Zari's tears fell freely onto the faces of her children.

The minutes stretched into an eternity as Zari waited, her ears straining for any sound from the direction Vista had gone. And then it came—a cacophony of screams, shouts, and the roaring crackle of flames growing ever higher. The forest ahead was ablaze, the fire's glow illuminating the ghastly scene. Zari's heart froze, but there was no sign of Vista.

A sudden touch on her shoulder made her jump. She whirled around, eyes wide with fear, only to see Vista standing before her, unscathed. Relief washed over her, but it was short-lived. His eyes—once full of life—were now hollow, lifeless. She stepped back, dread seeping into her bones.

"Vista?" she whispered, her voice trembling. "What happened? How did you...?"

Before she could finish, a voice screamed out from the flames. "RUN! RUN! That's not me!"

Zari's blood ran cold as she turned back to the figure before her. His face twisted and morphed, revealing a demon's visage—green eyes glowing with malice, a jagged scar marring its chin. The creature lunged, and Zari reacted instinctively, placing the children on the ground as she summoned her power. A blue symbol flared on her arm, and a whip of energy formed in her hand, crackling with deadly intent.

The demon grinned, its green aura pulsating as it advanced. Zari lashed out with the whip, but the energy dissipated against the creature's defenses like arrows bouncing off iron. Desperation clawed at her as she muttered, "An A-Class... What is it doing here?"

Her attacks continued, each strike weaker than the last as her strength waned. The demon pressed forward, implacable, until it was upon her. With a simple gesture, it swatted her aside as if she were nothing more than a fly. Zari's body hit the snow with a dull thud, her vision swimming with darkness. But she fought to stay conscious, to protect her children.

The demon loomed over her, its hand reaching out, not for her, but for the children. Zari's heart pounded as she forced herself to stand, one hand slipping to her side where a dagger—etched with ancient runes—rested. She screamed, the sound filled with every ounce of her remaining strength, and charged the demon. The blade in her hand glowed with a dark blue light as she plunged it toward the creature's heart.

But the demon was faster. Its hand closed around her throat, lifting her off the ground as the dagger slipped from her grasp, its light extinguished as it fell. Zari's vision blurred as the life was squeezed from her, but through the haze, she saw a familiar figure approaching—Vista, his body wreathed in flame, his eyes burning with fury.

Vista's arrival was like a thunderbolt. The fire around him blazed higher, its heat searing through the night as he launched himself at the demon. The forest became a battlefield of fire and

shadow, with Vista's red aura clashing against the demon's green. They fought with a speed and ferocity that defied mortal limits, their blows shaking the very earth beneath them.

Zari, gasping for breath, crawled to where her children lay. She scooped them up, holding them close as Vista's battle raged on. Her heart broke with every cry they made, every tear that fell from their innocent eyes.

A shadow passed overhead. Zari looked up just in time to see a second demon—a monstrous figure, its wings blotting out the stars—descending upon Vista. Before she could scream a warning, the creature hurled a spear of pure darkness, the weapon striking Vista in the chest with devastating force. Vista fell, his aura flickering as blood stained the snow.

Zari's scream tore through the night. With a surge of adrenaline, she kissed her children, imbuing them with the last of her energy. "I love you," she whispered before setting them down. Her blue aura flared as she retrieved her fallen dagger and rushed to Vista's side.

The demon loomed over Vista, ready to strike the final blow, but Zari attacked with renewed fury. She stabbed the dagger into the creature's collarbone, dragging it down its chest. The demon howled in pain, black energy spilling from its wounds. Vista, with the last of his strength, joined her, their combined power forcing the demon back.

But it wasn't enough. The demon, wounded but not defeated, roared with rage. Its eyes locked onto the children once more, and with a burst of speed, it lunged toward them. Zari and Vista moved as one, their bodies battered, their auras dimming, but their will unbroken. They reached the demon just as it grabbed Lyra, pulling her into its grasp.

A portal of black energy yawned open beneath them, the ground trembling as the demonic magic tore through the fabric of reality. Zari grabbed hold of the demon's arm, her fingers slipping in the blood and snow, while Vista tackled the creature, trying to wrestle their daughter free. But the portal's pull was too strong.

With a thunderous crack, the portal closed, swallowing all but the infant Kael, who lay crying in the snow. The forest, now eerily silent, burned around him.

As the first rays of dawn began to pierce the smoke-filled sky, a figure emerged from the woods. The man, his face obscured by the light, scooped up the child and cradled him close.

The forest, once a place of terror and loss, faded into the background as the man carried the child away, the flames dying out behind them. The baby Kael's cries softened as he was carried to safety, his last glimpse of the forest marked by the memory of warmth—a brief flicker of a mother's love in the bitter cold.