

1325

Acelina let out a long, harsh hiss, and the aura faded away. Caera, Jes, and Dao finally turned around, as if the invisible lure pulling them further into the tunnel had blinked out of existence. Muscles relaxed, panting and growling quietened until inaudible, and soon the only noise was the two impas and two gremlas tearing up bodies. They were hungry.

"Holy shit," David said, pushing himself back up to his feet. "First time in a while I didn't get hurt in a fight."

Daoka hopped back to him and hugged him, straight on, and he almost fell over. But she kept her grip tight around him and chirped into his ear as she squeezed hard enough his lungs stopped working. He had to pat her back a few times to get her to stop, and she rubbed her horns against his head and hair as she chirped some more.

"I said I'm fine." Smiling, he rubbed his forehead into Dao's. "How's everyone else?"

With a single click, Dao stepped back and looked to Acelina, and Acelina stepped to the side enough for Jes and Caera to come back to him.

Jes looked like shit. Dao and Jes wore a decent amount of armor, but there'd been so many Cainites, the gargoyle had been stabbed in the side. A hand over the wound was the best they had for now, and Jes grumbled as she glared down at her claws leaking blood down her side and leg. If her eyes could affect things, her furious glare would have burned the wound closed.[w@w.©\(v\)el@o\(r\)mm.com](mailto:w@w.©(v)el@o(r)mm.com)

Dao hopped back over to her lover, hugged her, and the two shared a kiss. In Hell, being surrounded by corpses and guts wasn't enough to stop a romantic moment.Ww.novelwóRM.c@m

"I watched Acelina's back, I know she's fine," David said. "Caera?"

Caera grumbled as she sat cat-like in front of him, but it didn't last, and she lifted an arm. A nasty gash ran down her shoulder, and it was not shallow. Unfortunately for the big tiger lady, she didn't have as much armor as the satyr or gargoyle, and once David got close, a few more gashes made themselves known.[w.w.nov\(e\)lW.RM.©om](mailto:w.w.nov(e)lW.RM.©om)

"Christ," he said.

"I killed four of them," Caera said. "Injuries are worth it."

Jes gestured up at the giant lady standing beside them.

"You might not have gotten injured if Acelina hadn't hit us with that aura. Hard to fight smart with her sin skull-fucking us."

"Nonsense," Acelina said. "My aura kept the Cainites from exploiting their positions. They did ambush us, unless that escaped your notice."

"Oh fuck off. You stayed in the back. The rest of us got swarmed."

Caera shook her head. "Acelina is right, Jes. We got ambushed. The aura made it into a brawl, instead. Be happy."

Jes squirmed a little, still clutching her gut, and looked back up at Acelina. For a second, it almost looked like she was going to say something crazy, like 'thank you', but that did seem to be outside her skill repertoire, so she grumbled and moved down the tunnel a little ways. Dao clicked twice up at Acelina, smiling, and hopped after her lover.

David put up a hand. "Las? How are you girls doing? You..." No point in asking. They were all quite enraptured with getting food, and they weren't big enough to just rip the bodies apart. Opening a corpse's chest up wasn't easy for a little demon. "The Cainites managed an ambush. How? I thought you could smell humans, especially when it's so many of them?"

"I can, normally." Caera gestured down at one nearby body, and the guts wrapped around their neck. "They're wearing remnant flesh."

"Remnant..." He took a small step back. Remnant flesh didn't last long after death. A day, sometimes less. "That's kind of smart, but also, kind of... specific. I mean, what possible reason could they have to do that other than for hunting demons?"

"That's what they were doing," Caera said after a wince and weight shift. "They were strong, too. They've eaten demon recently, and frequently, to be this strong."

"Do Cainites normally do stuff like this?"

"No," Caera said. "This is... pretty organized. They've probably been waiting here for hours, all for the chance a demon might just stumble on them."

Acelina hissed as she took a step toward David.

"Enough about the souls. They are dead. I want to know what that gold light was, unmarked."

"The gold light?"

"Yes, the gold light!" She came closer, growling and baring her fangs. "Earlier today, angels tried to kill us, and used a beam of gold light to do it. And now, you summoned a light of the same color. I did not see what you did, only that a Cainite had attacked you, and yet you sat there, unharmed."

David gulped, and looked past Acelina to Caera, but the tiger lady only tilted her head as she raised an eyebrow.

"I... don't know what it was," he said.

"You do not know?" the spire mother asked. "You did something! Speak!"

"I'm speaking I'm speaking! I'm telling you, I brought up my hand, and..." And the batlam rune flashed in his mind. "And it was like... I dunno, a reflex? Like, you know, when you jerk your hand up or head away because you see movement in the corner of your eye?"

The demons looked between each other, and the three with noses and lips frowned.

Daoka clicked a few times and gestured to Acelina.

"I was between him and the rest of you," Acelina said. "My wings blocked most of the light, and my indomitable aura left your weak minds too distracted to notice."

Of course, her words got her a few snarls, but when they looked David's way, all he could do was shrug.[w@W.noV\(e\)lWórm.com](mailto:w@W.noV(e)lWórm.com)

"She is right," he said. "I... did something. I snapped up my hand, gold light came out of it, and I blocked that Cainite's weapon. Even felt it. Felt like... metal hitting metal."

Acelina grumbled. Daoka clicked a few more times. Caera sighed. Jes, further down the tunnel, snorted and scooped up one sword in particular. Even at a distance, the glowing amber along its black surface was beautiful, and looked all too similar to the amber veins that ran along the tunnel walls. Or at least, it did, but even as Jes held it and walked back toward them, the veins pulsed a few times, and faded away.

"Well, shit," she said, and she tossed it to the ground. The once empowered sword bounced around on the gory floor before stopping at David's feet. "That coulda been useful."

David reached down, grabbed the hilt, and braced for... something, anything, to happen. It might explode. It might flash some new rune. It might--

He sucked in a breath and reeled back, but didn't let go. The sword dragged with him, and its weight stopped him from landing on his ass. Holy shit, it was flashing a rune. Every muscle in his body locked, lungs froze, and the world went silent as the sword hit him with the same electric sensation he'd felt when touching his sister.

One of the runes she'd planted in his mind flared behind his eyes. But before he could do something with it, it died away, and the electricity stopped.

The sword did not awaken.