

1371

"It's more than that! Cainites are running around with imbued weapons. They're based at the temple. Some guy named Greg has something to do with it, another unmarked. There are answers at that temple! Answers about what's happening. Answers that could save our lives!"

Silence fell on the room hard, with only distant remnant screams reaching their alcove as quiet echoes.

"And Renato?" Acelina asked.

"Renato is alive, and I'm going to find him. He's my friend. And you think having a tetrad help us isn't worth it?"

The spire mother growled, but quietly this time, and she aimed her eyeless gaze at Jeskura.

"If we'd known about all this shit earlier," Jes said, "about Cainites with imbued weapons, another unmarked, and remnants going crazy, I'd say we should have left and just reached the surface asap. We're going to get killed on this side trip."

Caera slammed her tail against the ground. It bled.

"We're not going to get killed. We're not. Just stay close and..." Sighing, Caera looked down at her own body. She was covered in bite marks and scratch marks, too, and her bad arm still wasn't completely healed. She looked Jes's way, only to find the gargoyle lower her hand from her bad side where she'd been stabbed by the Cainites.

Caera didn't bother looking back to the Las, but David did, and all four ladies, squatting behind David, squirmed. They didn't like all the yelling, but they were exhausted, and were probably agreeing with Jes right now.

Except...

"Hey," David said, "we wouldn't have met Lasca, Laara, Latia, and Laria if we hadn't taken this detour."

That earned the biggest eye-roll he'd ever seen from Jes, but the Las loved it, and they chirped and giggled as they swarmed him. Four sets of arms hugged him, and four sets of horns pressed against him as the little ladies rubbed their foreheads on his shoulders and back. It was too damn cute.

Daoka nodded, clicked a few times, and gestured to the Las.

"Oh yes," Acelina said, "the greatest reward for this perilous journey. Imps and grems." She settled one wing on her shoulder, but pulled the other in front of her so she could inspect the damage. "What is the word humans use for such creatures? Cockroaches?"

All four Las looked down and whined. High pitched, sad, puppy whines.

Daoka clicked angrily at the huge demoness as she scooted closer to David, and stroked the back and wings of the closest gremla. Latia turned to Daoka, whimpered a few times, and hugged her straight on, burying her face against Dao's chest above her breastplate.

"Sensitive," Jes said, chuckling.

"I'm just trying to see the bright side of things," David said.

"I think," Acelina said, "we should--"

"I think you should shut the fuck up," Caera said, slamming her tail again, "before we stop providing the protection we're giving you." After a heavy snarl, she marched away from the group, and disappeared down the tunnel.

David stared after her, and looked to Jes and Dao. They didn't look surprised or bothered, and even the Las seemed unperturbed by Caera's behavior. Latia's fit of whimpers from Acelina's insult had lasted a whole two seconds, and now she sat behind Lasca, inspecting her wings for damage.

"You... don't think we should go after her?" he asked.

Jes shook her head. "She's in hunt mode."

"Hunt mode?"

"You already know what it is. She's got prey in her sights."

"Yeah, but..." He scratched his head, tugged on his shaggy hair, and set his eyes on the path out of the alcove again. "I was talking to her yesterday. It wasn't this bad."

"She's a demon. She's not going to be happy until she's killed what she wants to kill." Jes reached out with her tail and poked him in the leg. "She's going to get angrier and angrier, more violent, all the good stuff."

That... made sense, as much as he didn't want to think about it. The girls were so awesome, it was easy to forget sometimes they were demons, killers, and lived on violence. It wasn't just something they did, but who they were.

His talk with Caera before had been a talk aimed at a fellow human being. No wonder Caera had told him to just stay out of her way^{www.novelworm.com}

Well, that just wouldn't do. She was vital to the team, and basically their de facto leader. If it wasn't for her, they'd be lost, he'd be lost, and curled up in a ball somewhere hoping someone else would deal with the problems dumped on his lap. Dao and Jes wouldn't be doing this journey, either, content to hide in a mountain and live their lives.

This wouldn't do.

"Stay here," he said, and he got up.

"David," Jes said, "I know you wanna be a nice guy, like one of the souls in the scrying pool, but--"
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"I'll be fine." Hopefully. This wouldn't be like the last conversation.

He walked down the winding path, and peeked around its curves a few times, going slow in case Caera decided to jump anyone who came after her. Or maybe she'd actually left them, and decided to search for Renato on her own? Shit. Shit shit. He walked faster.

Caera sat at the alcove's long, winding exit, peeking left and right down the tunnel it connected to.
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"Thank god," he said. "I thought--"

"I'm not an idiot, David. I'm not going anywhere without someone to watch my ass."

"Right, right." He stood beside her. Even with her sitting in classic cat fashion and him standing, she was almost as tall as him. "About what happened back there, at the death pits." He waited, but she said nothing, and didn't look his way. Okay, ball was in his court. "I guess I was expecting... I don't know. I figured... hey, Caera's determined to get this done, but she's level-headed, and she'll make smart decisions to make it happen."

She growled, and her claws dug at the stone, but she still said nothing.

"But Jes made a good point just now. You're demons. You do demon... things."

Slowly, she turned her head and looked up at him, and the anger in her eyes burned him to ash. But still she said nothing, waiting for him to make his point. He was now officially walking on thin ice, over a lava pit.

"We'll look for Renato," he said, "and we'll get to the temple, deal with the Cainites, all that. But holy shit, Caera, you charged ahead and almost got--"

"Almost got you killed? I was clearing a path--"

"Not me, you! You almost got yourself killed!"

The rage melted from her eyes, and she set her glare on the ground instead.

"What?"

"You ran ahead and started... I don't know, doing the demon thing Jes was talking about. That you've talked about before. You go berserk and just kill whatever's in your way until you get to the thing you're trying to get to. But you nearly got yourself killed."

"I was fine."

"Maybe, maybe not. I... I thought I'd... last time we talked, I thought I'd made obvious that... I'm not just asking about this because I'm worried about you getting us killed. I'm worried about you getti... you. I'm worried about you."

She growled again, but it didn't last, pattering out like a dying engine.

"You know how most demons die?"

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