

1379

After another not-so-serious growl, Acelina fell back into silence, but when he glanced back at her, he could see she looked happier. Some pep in her step, maybe? Or just that her wings weren't drooping as much?

"Mia was annoying as well."

"Yeah?" he asked. "How much did you see her at the spire?"

"Only twice. She visited the hatching pit and immediately annoyed me. Quite full of herself, despite her obvious fear."

"That... kinda sounds like Mia, yeah. She can get kinda uppity when she's put in a bad position, like a small dog. Sometimes she'll stay quiet. Sometimes she'll start yelling."

"But not you?"

"I mean, sometimes? I prefer to shut up and calculate."

"Calculate..."

"Told you he's a nerd," Jes said, looking back at them. "He--" She tripped over Laara, right over the mini gargoyle, and the two collapsed onto the ground. "You fucking little--"

Daoka hopped back, put a hand over her lover's mouth, and shook her head frantically as she gestured down the path. Everyone had stopped, even Caera, and only when everyone had grown dead silent did she move ahead in a slow prowl, like a tiger sneaking through the brush.

There was movement ahead, flickering in the shadows of the curving tunnel walls. Stealth mode. The problem with that was they couldn't get against the wall or hide behind any boulders; no boulders to be had, and bloodgrip was everywhere.

Caera held up a hand and gestured to the Las. The little ladies wasted no time, swarmed around David, and got his armor back on him. Daoka gave him back the huge dagger, and Jes picked up some dirt and rubbed it into his forehead. Etched it in, more like, with claws, and David clenched his fists as he bit down the urge to yelp and push her away. He needed a number if the disguise was going to work.

"Create an opening," Caera whispered, "and I'll be there."

Create an opening, right. Chat up the Cainites like last time? He nearly died last time.

It didn't matter. He was committed, and this was the path toward the temple anyway, along with Renato.

Fully geared and carrying a hundred pounds of metal, he dragged his ass to the next curve of the tunnel, and listened. No talking. He listened closer. Still no talking, but there were a few clicks, so quiet they might as well have been pebbles rolling down the beach.

He stepped out around the corner, and froze.

"Caera," he said, "you can come out."

"It's not Cainites?"

He slowly shook his head, and waited for Caera to take lead again. And when she did, the inevitable followed.

"No!" She dashed forward into the next cavern, but there wasn't anything to be done.

It was a massacre. A mess of bones littered the ground, demon and human, with a dozen meera weapons sticking out of the stone. Bits of armor lay about, but less than a battle scene like this should have had. The bodies had been picked clean, and weren't bodies anymore. Skeletons.*wW.(n)(c)©EL@oRm.Com*

A few creatures lifted their heads from the mess, and while they'd moved in David's direction, the moment Caera came into view, they ran. Big spider-like creatures called fallo spiders ran off, each the size of a large dog. Terrifying, but skittish, like big tarantulas if tarantulas were red, black, and spiky. They'd caused the flickering shadows.

Against the back wall was a large skeleton with just enough flesh left to keep the bones together. A tetrad, someone with two arms and hooves, and judging from the mess of bones around them, wings. A korgejin then, like Renato was. But the skeleton had no head.

He didn't ask why. Anyone who killed a tetrad would take the head for a trophy.*@ww.novEiwOrM.c(o)M*

"Renato!" Caera pushed the other bones aside, threw aside others with a scream, and stopped in front of the skeleton of her old friend. Silence fell on the cave with the weight of a frozen blanket, complete with stabbing pain as the cold sank into David's chest.*wW.nOσtE/wOtM.COIII*

Daoka clicked a couple times, but her voice trailed off as she came closer and stood in the middle of the mess.

"Looks like a battle, yeah," Jeskura said, and she squatted down beside the satyr to examine some bones. "I'm seeing a couple dozen human bodies, at least. A few succubi, one incubus, a vratorin, and a gorgala. Some imps and grems, too."

"Renato's friends," Caera said between clenched teeth. "He liked to be lazy, and let them do all they work. But he protected them when they needed it. It was... They were happy."

Wincing, David joined Dao and Jes, and gave Caera her distance. If that really was Renato's corpse, he'd been dead for at least a few days, long enough for most of the flesh to melt off the bones. Judging from her reaction, she'd liked him more than anyone had figured. It was not the time to come up to her and comfort her, not yet.

The Las scouted around, and it wasn't long before they were whining as they scooped up some little bones. Imp and grem bones. They sat with each other and whimpered, and after a few minutes, got back up and left the bones behind. They drifted toward Caera, and sat nearby, looking at her and the giant skeleton with big, sad eyes.

It was a rough scene. Bones were everywhere in Hell, left over from demons or souls from their first death, and their remains littered the land. But seeing demons lament put a whole new twist on things that turned the scary, disturbing scenery into something... else, something that didn't fit Hell at all. Like, a funeral, with people gathered around a coffin, crying and mourning.

David's heart rate jumped, and he took a small step back and looked away.

"David?" Jes asked.

"Nothing. Don't worry about me." He gave her his best 'nothing's wrong' smile, found a spot in the cave near the wall away from the demons, and watched. Slow, deep breaths, David.

It was a painful memory, and it'd be shallow to bring it up.

Dao and Jes both looked at him for a while, but let it go and moved on to Caera. They said nothing to her, though. They squatted down beside her and looked the tetrad's skeleton up and down.

"Scratch marks," Jes said, and she gestured to a few different places. "They stabbed him deep, in a dozen different places." Her wing gently gestured out at the bones around. "Looks like he took down a dozen souls, at least."*WVW.IIIOvE()wOrM.(c)oM*

"A dozen souls couldn't kill a tetrad," Caera said. "They must have used imbued weapons."

"Probably, yeah."

Jes knew how to deal with Caera. Straight, to-the-point talk about the problem at hand: the Cainites.

Daoka clicked a few times and gestured to the other tunnels connecting in the distance.

"About a day from here," Caera said, "if you know the straightest path. I do."

Nodding, Jes reached down and scooped up one of the meera swords. Dented, but that wouldn't matter when hitting flesh.

"Las," David said. "Help me out?"

The four little ladies hopped over, their sad eyes shifted to joyful in a matter of seconds, and they wasted no time helping him take off the extra bits of his heavy disguise he didn't need right now. Dagger, too. Not weighed down by a whole second person's worth of weight, he wiped off some sweat, thanked the impas and gremlas, and looked back to Caera. She hadn't moved.