

1391

Patrolling was maybe a strong word, but they were marching around nonetheless, coming in and out of tunnels with determination. Probably patrolling, and hunting, like the first group of Cainites they'd run into, the ones who'd set the ambush.

Someone jammed dry ice down David's throat, and it boiled inside his guts. Fuck. Double fuck.**WwW.NoveLwOrm.coM**

"I could... go down there."

Caera snapped a glare at him.

"I said the decoy strategy isn't going to help much here, David."

"Not the decoy strategy. I mean... When we started this journey, we didn't know they had an unmarked guy leading them. Now we do, and it sounds like they're worshiping the guy, practically, from what that Cainite said. If I go down there, maybe I can... convince them to take me to him?" He gulped down the boiling pain in his stomach. "I bet they'll all be so surprised to see another unmarked, they'll gather around inside the temple. And then you can run in and slaughter them while they're distracted."

The girls all traded looks before Caera set her stony gaze on him again.

"You could die."

"Y-Yeah, I know."

Dao shook her head and tugged on his shoulder.

"She's worried about what happened last time," Jes said, "when two unmarked got together. Frankly, so am I. I nearly died too, ya know."

"I know, I know. But if we're gonna kill all these people, we need a big distraction."

Lasca came in close. "Acelina could use aura again?"

"I could," the giant demoness said, on her hands and knees behind them where she was out of sight. "How many Cainites do you see?"

"At least a hundred," Caera said, "all with weapons, and at least ten imbued weapons."**WwW.NoveLwOrm.coM**

The spire mother sighed and shook her head.

"If I drowned them in my aura, they would swarm us. Reducing a battle into a mindless brawl could prove disastrous against such numbers."

"Then we go with the original plan," David said, "that we had before we ever found out what was going on here. I go in as a distraction, you come in and kill everyone when their backs are turned. I just do it as a fellow unmarked instead of a Cainite, this time. This way, they'll all be distracted. Probably."

"There's a lot more Cainites, now," Caera said, doing her best to yell at him without yelling. "I made that plan before I knew any of this."

"But it'll work, right? You heard the way that Cainite talked about Greg," David squirmed as he peeked his head out over the edge of the tunnel exit again. "I'll just... go down there, act like I heard about another unmarked, and had to fight tooth and claw past demons to get here. That's why I'm alone. They'll buy it... right?"

"And if Hell starts to break again?" Jes asked.

"Then you'll kill Greg, right?"

"And if we can't get to you in time?"

"Then... I'll kill him myself." He grabbed his dagger and lifted the stupidly heavy thing.

Dao poked him, clicking away.

"She's right," Caera said. "They'll disarm you first."

"Fuck, true. But, still, it's our best option, right? And there's a good chance Greg has no idea what'll happen if I come close."**WwW.NoveLwOrm.coM**

"Unless the woman in armor warned him, too," Jes said.

"Double... fucking... fuck." He ground his teeth and glared down at the dagger. "Too many unknowns, but we don't have a choice."

"We... have a choice," Caera said, peeking down over the edge with him. "We can leave."

"Excuse me?" Acelina said. "You cannot be serious."

"I am serious." Caera pulled back and shook her head. "I... don't want to lose David for this."

Everyone froze as they looked at each other.

"I... I uh." Oh fuck. He gulped again and forced himself to look Caera in the eyes. "I... I mean, I..."

Latia raised a claw. "B-But Greg? Imbued weapons? Dangerous! Dangerous!"

Everyone grew quiet again and traded looks, while Caera kept her eyes on David, and he kept his eyes on her. The anger she'd been carrying the past few days vanished, replaced by a heavy weight, something that pulled down on her gaze and she struggled to keep it from falling to the ground. The quiet went on, and soon everyone set their eyes on Caera and David.**WwW.NoveLwOrm.coM**

The fuck was he supposed to say? They'd come on this journey because it was the least they could do, if Caera was going to lead him to False Gate and hopefully the Forgotten Place. She had something she'd wanted to do for years, something that was eating her up inside, and now she was willing to let it go? For him?

Something tingled inside him, and it wasn't the weird, magical fingers that plucked the strings that flowed through him, either.

He squirmed. Much as he wanted to look away, to disappear into a corner and get away from Caera's somber gaze, he couldn't. He wouldn't. Her gaze pulled him in, her red eyes surrounded by eternal black. His mouth went dry.

"I... think we should deal with the Cainites," he said. "Caera deserves revenge, and Latia's right, too. This Greg guy could be a problem if he's holed up here, apparently playing leader or something to the Cainites, and the imbued weapons and..." He shrugged, and managed a small smile for Caera. "I want to help."

Caera and he looked at each other for longer, and it hurt. Eye contact was never easy, overwhelming, stimulus overload, but he couldn't tear his gaze from hers. What was going on?

"Then enough of this ridiculous drama," Acelina said, and she gestured out toward them and the exit beyond. "Cainites are a menace, and organized Cainites with imbued weapons could prove a threat to a bailliff and their district. We should deal with this problem now before it becomes worse."

If Acelina had a face to analyze, he'd be doing that right now, trying to tell if she was being sincere about her reasoning. It sounded kinda forced. Maybe.

"For once, I agree with McTits," Jes said. "I don't know about you guys, but I want to come back to Death's Grip someday, kill Diogo, kill Tacitus, and maybe even become the spire ruler."

Everyone stared at her.

"What? I could be a ruler." She shrugged and gestured out of the tunnel exit. "My point is, souls in Hell outnumber demons, you know? We kill and eat souls all the time, but more and more just keep getting dumped off, and they scurry into the tunnels and hide. If they ever got together and organized, it'd be a problem."