

1392

Caera took a deep breath before sharing a quick smile with David that sent more flutters through him.

"Jeskura's right," the tiger said. "It's happened before, and it could happen again, especially with an unmarked leading them, somehow making them imbued weapons."

"Then... I guess I'm going down there," he said. "Unless someone has a better idea?"

No one said a thing until Jes came in close.

"Hold still," she whispered. "Don't make any sounds."

"Eh?"

She reached out and dragged her claws across his chest. His breastplate only covered half his chest, and she sank her black claws along his skin deep enough to draw blood. Fucking ow. He jerked back and clutched his chest, but bit down the urge to yell. It got a lot harder when she rubbed some rocks against the wound.

"There, now you look like you've been struggling to survive demon encounters."

"Thanks..." He glared at Jes, and she struggled to not laugh.

Silence fell on them again, and David took some deep, slow breaths. Calm before the storm. The Las all crept closer, and each of them leaned in and touched his arm and leg as they looked up at him with big, worried eyes. Dao did the same, looking somehow more worried despite no eyes. Acelina looked behind them, scanning for a sneak attack or something. Caera and Jes both frowned at him, but with time, their expressions shifted to determined. Caera took longer.

They all backed further away from the tunnel exit, and he stood up.

The journey down into the cavern was the strangest thing David had ever felt. Walking down the slope of stone was easy enough, even with the breastplate and dagger weighing him down; he was used to that weight by now. It was how every Cainite below, going about their business, coming and going to and from hunts, all slowly turned and looked up at him, that sent a wave of vertigo through him; he almost tripped. The chattering died away, and like watching a ripple spread in water, each Cainite affected the one next to them, until their heads turned to look up at him in a wave.

It was only seconds before every one of them looked at him, and stared, more than a few with mouths hanging open. 423. 632. 512. 398. Every soul had a high number, along with armor, weapons, and more than a few cuts and scars. David's chest gash didn't look bad at all compared to them.

David stopped ten feet up, near to the onlooking crowd of at least a hundred Cainites, and more faces stuck their heads out from the black, Gothic temple wall. It had windows on both floors, and more faces stuck out from them to gaze at David. The temple may not have had the majesty of a proper Gothic cathedral from the surface, but it made up for it with its sheer audacity to exist underground and, built into a wall, like dwarves had made it.

The closest Cainite drew their weapon, a big sword, the same size as the one Jes now wielded. He struggled to keep it pointed straight, though; even Cainite strength couldn't really handle the weight of meera metal.

"Who the fuck are you?"

Time to put on the best acting of his life.

"David," he said, dialing up his exhausted, beaten, and worn expression and body language. Not exactly difficult. "I heard there's another unmarked, and--"

One of the Cainites, a woman, climbed up onto his ledge of stone and wasted no time putting a sword to his chest. He took a step back, but a small one. No point in running for his life, not anymore.

"You're... unmarked!?"

"Heh, yeah, I am. It's uh... been rough going, because of it. Demons been wanting to capture me and take me to their leader or something." He gestured to his chest and the fresh slash marks. "I heard from some other souls -- that's where I got the armor -- that there's another unmarked down here? Someone called Greg? I uh, figured I'd--"

The woman snapped out a hand, grabbed his wrist, and yanked him forward. Instead of skewering him on her blade, she eyed him close, and her rather menacing gaze grew wide as she stared at his forehead. Being this close to a woman with 620 etched on her forehead sent his heart rate up through his throat, and he forced down the urge to hyperventilatew@W.novElwaRm.cOm

"You really are unmarked," she said. Infiltration confirmed.

He gulped and nodded. "There's more out there, too, from what I've heard."

"What have you heard? Who's been talking to you?"

"I was captured by demons, and they were talking about it when your group attacked them. A few Cainites survived, talked about this place, then more demons showed up and I had to run to get away."WwW.môV.a1w-or(m).Com

The woman glared at him for a little while longer, reached up, and rubbed her thumb along his forehead.

"It's true."

"Yeah." Stop it. Don't be so chatty, David.wvW.m0v@0w-or(m).com

"Take him to Gregory!" one of the Cainites below said. The crowd had grown completely silent at first, but now whispered between each other, and talk of 'Gregory', 'unmarked', and 'saving them' rose above the noise.

The woman held out her hand.(w)wW.nO@éiW-rm.côM

"Not letting you see him armed. Gimme the dagger."

He almost gave it to her instantly. He knew someone would take it before letting him see Greg, but the budding actor in him told him he was supposed to not have had a plan for how this interaction would go, so he feigned hesitation before setting it in her palm. She handled the weight with little issue, better than he could anyway. Why didn't demon hearts give him physical strength like that? Did he need to eat a certain amount? Did they multiply your strength based on your number?

The woman, tall, thin, with long raven hair and cold, dark eyes, stepped down the slope and used her sword and new dagger to spread the crowd. Everyone got out of the way, but they looked David up and down with a strange mixture of wonder, and... contempt.

Oh fuck, he hadn't even thought of that. Envy. Maybe they were envious of him, if Greg had given them reason to envy his powers. Or maybe they were envious of his lack of a number, and how he wasn't -- hopefully -- doomed to suffer hundreds of horrible deaths as a remnant if he died in Hell.

It took every ounce of mental power he had to not look back and up at the tunnel, where the girls were waiting for their moment. That moment would probably come while he was in the big temple, surrounded by Cainites, with Greg nearby. If they created a distraction, he might be able to grab a Cainite's weapon and kill Greg. And then... die? Hopefully, the girls would slaughter their way to David before he had to put his own life on the line.

The entrance door was an archway carved into the blackstone big enough for a child of the Old Ones, and the stone absorbed light almost as much as one of those super black colors humans invented. It got dark, fast, and David sucked in a breath as the shadow buried him. The tunnel was only ten feet long though, and stepping through it was like a long blink of the eyes, opening up into a chamber befitting a grand cathedral.