

1401

That was her cue. She snapped out her damaged wing hard, and she bit down a yell as the limb fought against her. But it was straight now, and she flapped both wings hard, launched herself into the air, and disappeared into a tunnel

Leaving nothing but silence.

David spun around and ran to Daoka, but the Las were already on it. Each one came up to Daoka with a freshly farmed Cainite heart, handed them to her, and got to work gathering more.*w w w . n o v e l W o r l d . c o m*

"Strange," Acelina said, her eyeless gaze following the two imps and two gremlas. He didn't ask.

He got down on his knees beside Dao. The satyr lay on her back, head on Jeskura's lap, and the gargoyle stroked her lover's head between her four ram horns as she sniffed.

"You almost died," Jes said.

Dao smiled up at her and clicked twice.

"Don't say that! You almost died!" Jes lifted a hand, like she was ready to punch Dao or something, but no one bothered to stop her. With a weak sigh and shoulder tremble, she put her hand back down on Dao's shoulder, and closed her eyes.

Acelina cut the farmed hearts into pieces with her claws and slipped them into Dao's mouth. Dao tried to use her own hands, but got them a few inches off the ground before giving up. Blood was everywhere, and a lot of it was hers.

"I'm sorry," David said. "I'm... so sorry, I--"

Jes snapped out her closer wing and hit him across the face with the blunt side of its thumb claw. She was not gentle.*x W w . n o v e l W o r l d . c o m*

"Don't fucking apologize! Dao saved your life because she likes you, damn it. Don't fucking... apologize."

"I..." He gulped down the words and forced himself to look at Dao's stomach. She wore armor that covered plenty of her body, even a chunk across her lower stomach, but there was no way to strap chunks of meera metal to the skin in a way that'd cover everything. The sword had entered above the stomach guard, just below her sternum, and as if to announce its deadly damage, Dao coughed, and blood splattered over her lips.

"She'll... I think she'll live," Caera said, but her voice was heavy. "I hope. We got plenty of hearts here to eat. I've seen demons survive chest wounds like this, if they were fed immediately." Growling loud enough everyone looked at her, Caera backed up and paced left and right beside the group. "What we don't have, is time. Dao will take at least a week to heal from this enough to move on her own, maybe more because who the fuck knows how much damage an angel blade does. That angel you let go is going to come back with reinforcements in less time than that."

David didn't look back at Caera, eyes locked on Dao and the leather straps wrapped tight around her mid section, failing to keep her blood inside her. She did her best to swallow down the pieces of heart Acelina gave her, but she coughed, turning the process into a chore and covering her lips and chin in crimson. But she tried again, and got another piece down.

"That angel, she might not get reinforcements," David said.

"Yes, she will!" Caera came up behind David and yanked on his shoulder, turning him around hard enough he had to catch his weight on his palms. "She's an angel, David! She thinks demons are less than trash, and apparently she and all the other angels have been told that all unmarked need to die!" She slammed her thick tail down, and half yelled half meowed in pain. It bled. "Why didn't you kill her!?"

"Because Dao didn't want me to! Because I didn't want to! I didn't even want to kill the other two!"

"Then what the fuck happened? You... You summoned blackstone! You reached out and ripped the ceiling open. You summoned amber! No one can do that, David. No one can do that... except Hell herself."

Everyone grew silent again, even the Las, chattering coming to a quick stop as they dumped another four hearts onto Acelina's lap. They stared at him, big eyes wide with wonder.*x @ W . n o v e l W o r l d . c o m*

"David... did that?" Latia asked, and she came close enough she put a hand on his shoulder. Squatting beside him on her tiny hooves, she rubbed her horns into his arm before looking up at him again, confused.

"I... don't know what happened," he said. "I don't know how to explain--"

Acelina snorted. "Try."

He took a deep breath and forced himself back to his feet. Okay, try to understand. What happened? What the fuck happened? His memory of it was a blur, like trying to see through a drinking glass.

"It... wasn't any rune," he said. "I touched Greg, and it made the runes click for how to use the anvil to make imbued weapons. Not that that's any use now, with the amber vein the anvil was tapped into destroyed."

"Can't make another?" Lasca asked. "David special! Controls Hell!"

He winced. "I don't think I can. Normally, I can feel... strings, moving through me, like musical instrument strings. The strings are everywhere, and as I move around, I can feel them inside me, moving as I move. And there's this part of me, these... fingers, I guess, inside my soul that let me play them. They're what let me use runes, too. And..." He gestured back to Dao. "I saw Dao get hurt, and I... I hit the strings, really, really hard." The blurry memory sent a buzz up through him, like he stood on a subwoofer. "It... summoned something."

"Summoned?" Caera asked.

"Yeah, summoned. I was... It was like I'd caught a ride on something, something else that exists in the... the... whatever it is the strings exist in. I latched onto it, and then it pulled me deep. The deeper I went, the less I could think. And... And whatever it was, it told me to... to... use it. And when I did, it helped me play the strings really, really loud. So loud they... changed Hell." He looked at the two spikes he'd summoned that'd hit their targets, and swallowed down the need to puke. "I did it, but I don't know how anymore. I can't... feel that part of me anymore."

"Unless you do what you did last time," Caera said, "and... hit the strings really hard? Summon this thing again?"

"I guess? Maybe? I don't know how I did it. It was... I felt... I don't know." That wasn't true. He knew. He knew inside, he'd had an emotional breakdown in that moment, and had just let his emotions loose. Just like how his emotions affected the aura he created, and amplified it, the emotions he'd felt then had forced him to hit the strings so hard, his real fingers hurt. "I don't think I could do it again, not easily, or at least, not right now. I need to figure this out."

Caera's one eye cut him into pieces.

"Yeah, well, you figure it out. I'm going to check out the temple." And before he could say anything, she ran off, literally, ignoring her wounds and pouncing toward the half crumbled temple.

David stared after her before looking at the rest of them, Daoka in particular. The Las made room for him, and he knelt down beside her again, wincing for a whole new host of reasons.

"What happened?" he asked Jes and Acelina. "I was in the temple, and Greg turned out to be a fucking sociopath with delusions of grandeur. He was going to sacrifice me to see what kind of imbued weapon I could make. I kept expecting you girls to show up when it seemed like all the Cainites were in the temple, and then... that angel showed up." He gestured to the burning corpse, still stuck on a spike. The armor and weapons were gone, and the wings, and clothes. It barely looked like a corpse anymore. Even the bones were melting and burning away.

The Las and Acelina all looked to Jes, but Jes kept her eyes on Dao, still cradling the riiva's head on her lap.

"We were about to," Acelina said. "But, as it turns out, the angels had been following us. Or perhaps they had found their own Cainites, and had somehow learned of this Greg and his congregation. They approached from a different tunnel, and were waiting, as well. When you called for help, they attacked." Acelina sighed and gently caressed Dao's cheek with the blunt side of a claw. "We joined when Shaul entered the temple, realizing we had no choice. Caera went first, and she dashed for the temple when..." Acelina dragged a claw down the side of her face. "That woman you let go stopped her, and took her eye."

Her left eye. David covered his left eye with a palm, looked down, and bit down the urge to scream. Now wasn't the time to scream or cry or any of that shit. He was fine. The girls were not.

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