

1402

"Dao," he said, and he patted his owner on the shoulder gently. "Are you... gonna be okay? I can stay here, if you want, and--"

Dao clicked twice, chirped once, and smiled up at him.

"Go after Caera," Jes said. "There's nothing you can do here. And there might still be some Cainites in the temple. Better go help Caera take them out, or before she gets herself killed."

"I... don't know if--"

"We protect!" Lasca said, and she grabbed her fellow impa Laara. The mini-gargoyles helped David back to his feet. "Cainites all dead, for sure. But we protect."

"All dead." Laara said, and she patted Daoka on the leg. "Daoka strong! Killed many."

"She is strong," Jes said. "She'll live."

Acelina nodded and helped feed Daoka another heart. "She will be full, soon. And then tomorrow, we will see."

Full. Demons could only eat so much resonance before they couldn't absorb anymore, and a demon on a full belly was at their peak for healing. If Daoka couldn't heal, she'd die, and...

He forced himself to look away, and walked to the temple, stepping over piles of corpses the Las had been moving and farming. The lava wasn't a problem, thankfully, sticking to cracks in the ground the hellquakes had created, and never becoming anymore than a trickle. A trickle was more than enough to melt and burn Cainite bodies, though, and they had to avoid some fire. *w@W.N@ve!wôM.CO*

David didn't look at the girl he shredded, and carefully avoided looking at her severed head. Her wings were still there, fully intact, in two different parts of the cavern.

Back in the temple, bodies everywhere, Caera was nowhere to be seen. But the giant demon skull that'd once been the centerpiece of a display of demon skulls, was freshly destroyed. Renato avenged. Sort of.

"Caera?" he asked.

No answer, but a loud, annoyed growl eventually came out of one hallway. It was an enormous cathedral, with large archways that led into other halls, and Caera had followed one of them down. He went after her, but Lasca grabbed his hand *w@W.n@vELw@r@cO*

"David? Where other unmarked?" *@(w)W.nO@e(!)wôRm.c@M*

"Greg? He's right... here..." What the fuck. Greg wasn't there anymore. A skeleton was, with a destroyed skull, face crushed in, with the rock still beside it. It'd been coated in blood before, and now it wasn't. Blood faded fast in Hell, but it usually lasted a few hours. Dead flesh lasted a couple days.

"Where?"

"The skeleton. That's... That's Greg." *w@W.N@ve!WôRm.côM*

"He was a skeleton? You killed a skeleton?" Lasca stared up at him with her big eyes, one eyebrow raised.

"N-No, he was perfectly human like me when I killed him. I... what the fuck."

Lasca shrugged. The mystery of why an unmarked would melt away a thousand times faster than a normal corpse didn't interest her. The fancy book on the giant pulpit did. She scaled it easily, threw it down to Laara, and Laara held it up to David.

"Book!" she said.

"Thanks. Um, can you hold on to it for me, Laara? I wanna talk to Caera first."

Laara saluted him, and slipped the leather-bound, dark book under her arm. The three of them tiptoed over the tiny bits of lava running down the cracks in the floor, and David stepped around the bodies; the Las just walked on them. It was a ridiculous mess, and blood dripped from the balcony above. From the ground floor, David couldn't see up there very well, but more than a few arms hung off the edge between sharp, pointy railing bars, and some legs, too.

The Cainites were dead. Mission successful. Kinda.

He stood in the archway and peeked down the stairs. Big archway, big stairs, meant for big demons, and he almost had to jump down each step until he reached the next room. Predictably, it was a big room full of cages, because of course it was. What use was the anvil if you didn't have fuel to feed the process?

The cages were empty, but they were big enough to house hundreds of humans, with black bars covered in spikes. The ceiling was high, more than big enough for a child of the Old Ones, like the chamber above, and more skull braziers dangled from it by thick black chains. They'd burn eternally, another quirk of Hell.

Caera stood by a cage, up on her hind legs so she could glare down at it from an eight-foot vantage point. With one hand out to hold on to it, she glared down at the blackstone floor. A huge crack cut along the room, and many of the cages had snapped from the tension. One crack along the wall leaked with lava, a trickle that oozed from where it'd been fed into the anvil.

David came up beside her and stood facing the cage, but the moment he opened his mouth, Caera got back on all fours, and walked off. Bitting down the urge to say something, he looked back at the two impas, and Lasca and Laara both shrugged. Social dynamics for demons might have been simpler than it was for humans, but it wasn't an imp or grem's forte.

He followed and fell in beside the tiger demon as she found another hallway, and the two explored the various holes and crevices of the temple. It had rooms, big and full of cages, torture devices, and plenty of meera weapons and meera armor; leather straps to go with, too. She moved onto the next room.

"Caera," he said at last. "Can... Can I see?"

"What?"

"The wound. Let me see."

She turned her head around to glare at him, but she did it with her bad eye first, earning a growl as she realized she couldn't see him from that angle.

"I fucked up," she said.

"No, you didn't."

"Yes, I did. I made a mistake and lost an eye. Demons almost never regrow eyes unless they're very old, or maybe a spire ruler. That fucking angel, the angel you let go! She..." Every muscle in the tiger's body tensed, and David inched away from her as she clawed at the floor. It passed, and she sighed as she moved into the next hall. It was a big cathedral alright, full of rooms meant for giant demons to treat as bedrooms, with chains dangling from huge archways that'd make noise if anyone tried to sneak in. The thousands of attached skulls would knock on each other, like bells. And they did as Caera pushed them aside.