

1404

"I bet it's all in here." He held out a hand and Laara gave the book to him. A quick turn of the page revealed what he already knew. Runes of the ancient language lay within, explaining the process, and it included the magical runes that he needed to know, to get to 'click', to control it. He touched the pages, and while a tiny tingle danced along his fingers, it was clear he'd already absorbed the knowledge from Greg, and Greg had absorbed it from the book.

"Sacrifice," he said. "It's about souls, resonance, and essence. Souls are... complicated, and I still don't have the information to understand them, but I know they act as tethers to resonance and essence. Or maybe cages, or homes. To make an imbued weapon, you shatter a soul, trap the resonance and essence, and the two energies feed off each other like some kind of fission explosion. But the weapon has to be keyed to someone, so they can drip feed their own essence into it to keep the reaction going."

Caera raised a brow, but hissed and shook her head, like trying to dislodge an insect. She'd raised the wounded eyebrow. Lasca and Laara both stared at him like he was God speaking in puzzles.

"It means," he said, squatting down in front of the Las and Caera, the tiger still on her four legs, "that if I want to make an imbued weapon, I'd need to sacrifice a soul. Their soul would go to wherever they normally go, so they're not, like, trapped in the weapon, thank god. But yeah, we'd have to kill

"That explains the cages," Caera said. "Maybe we should have kept some Cainites alive."
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David frowned, juggled the thoughts in his head, and let the frown go. Disgusting an idea as it was, pinning someone down and killing them over the anvil, it was Hell and the souls in it weren't exactly innocent. Corpses literally surrounded him, and other than Greg's skeleton, every one of them had a number, a big one. They were murderers and rapists and everything in between. Would it be so bad to sacrifice such a person to create an awesome weapon?

Yeah, it kinda would. The thought made him sick.

"I have no idea how the anvil was made," he said. "I'm guessing the one in False Gate is a lot bigger? And maybe has instructions on how to make aera armor and weapons?"

"Yeah, maybe," Caera said, taking a peek at the big demon skull she'd destroyed. "I... think we're done here. Let's go."

"Okay." Done. Side quest complete. And all they'd lost was being hidden from angels, Caera's eye, and maybe Daoka's life.
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He gulped down that thought, too. Don't think about it. Don't even consider it. He could freak out and have a meltdown if Daoka died, but not until then.

Sure enough, Acelina and the two gremlas were hard at work, farming hearts and setting them in a jumble by one side of the cavern near Dao and Jes. What bodies they were done with, they moved to the other side, throwing them on to a gigantic pile.

Acelina stopped in front of Shaul's corpse. It barely existed anymore, ashes and burning bones.

"A shame," she said, and she gestured to David with a wing. "Did you have to destroy the two angels so completely? Imagine the power of an angel's heart."

"I... didn't mean to. The song, the thing that pulled me under, it was... it made it hard to think clearly. Or more like, I was under water, and my thoughts couldn't quite reach the surface? The vibration pulled me so deep I couldn't get my thoughts to..." Sighing, he looked down and stared at the bloody, cracked ground. "I don't know. I don't know what it was, what happened, how I could do any of the stuff I did. I just... knew I could. I could tell Hell to do something, and it would. She would." He avoided looking at the two spikes he'd summoned, and sat beside Dao instead.

Still alive, but each breath was a labored mess, and she coughed up more blood.

God, if you're real, don't take her.

"Is she going to make it?" he asked.

Jeskura gently caressed Dao's face with the blunt size of a claw, wings heavy and drooping behind her.

"We won't know until tomorrow."

"Then we wait," Caera said. "That angel will probably return with reinforcements, but that'll take days."

"We better fucking wait," Jes said, and she glared and growled at the tiger.

David opened his mouth to say something, but Caera came close, head down, and he shut up.

"I'm sorry," the tiger said.

Jes, Acelina, and all four Las stopped and looked at her like she'd said something crazier than David's explanation about fission reactions. Demons didn't say those words.

The gargoyle shook her head, and her tail wagged. Once.

"Yeah, well, Daoka wanted to help you. And besides, these fuckers needed to be stopped. It wasn't just about your revenge." She gestured to Caera. "Besides, you got fucked up, too. I can't be too mad at you."

Caera smiled, leaned in, and nudged Dao's side with her snout.

"You doing okay, Dao?"

The riiva's smile was so subtle, it was almost invisible, but she managed a chirp.

"Good. You'll live through this."

"Will live," Lasca said. "Seen imps and grems hurt worse! Will live." The four little ladies all sat around Dao's hooves and patted her on the legs.

"Give the riiva room," Acelina said, and she waved them off with a wing. They clicked up at her, frowning, but obeyed, and got back to work fetching hearts.

Dao clicked once.

"She's right," Jes said. "Everyone needs to eat."

"Yeah." Caera prowled around to Jes's side of Dao, and picked up a heart from the pile. She swallowed it down without a thought to enjoy it, but she did smile. "Maybe I'll regrow the eye in a hundred or so years."

"Maybe," Acelina said, sitting beside them, content to let the Las continue their work. Reading David's thoughts, she glanced back at the little ladies before leaning in toward David. "They're behaving unusually," she whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Yes. Imps and grems do not... devote themselves to anything or anyone. They are pests, concerned only with eating. And yet these four ladies are willing to fight for you."

"I thought they just wanted the Cainites gone from their favorite mountain."

She leaned in closer, and Caera and Jes leaned in, too.

"That is true," the spire mother said, "but imps and grems do not commit to plans or strategies, either. Their desire to help is... I said it earlier, that they are strange."

David tilted his head. "I thought they'd stick around here, in their mountain, after we left."
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"Do you want them to?"

"I... No, I don't. They've been helpful, and they're nice. I like them."

Dao chirped a couple times, sneaking in another tiny smile.

"Yeah," Jes said. "I kinda like them, too. Cute little fucks, and useful." Caera handed her a heart, and she downed it quickly before again setting her hands on her lover's shoulders, eyes never leaving her.
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"They are useful," Acelina said, "but how useful will they be in the Grave Valley?"

"Imps and grems are everywhere," Caera said. "And unlike us, imps and grems rarely kill each other on sight for a quick meal. They group up. If we had some with us on the journey, that could be useful." She lifted her head enough to look past Acelina's wings to the little ladies dragging Cainite bodies around. "They've surprised me, and convinced me. But it's up to you, David."

"Up to me..." Nodding, he sucked in a breath, did his best to look and sound confident, stood up, and joined the Las. "Lasca, Laara." The two mini-gargoyles let go of a corpse's legs and joined him immediately. "Laria, Latia." The two winged mini-satyr did the same. Acelina was right. They were strangely committed to him, or at least receptive to him. "I wanna talk to you girls."

"Yes?" Laria smiled up at him and tapped a hoof on the ground a couple times. "Did we flank good?"

"I uh, didn't actually see the fight, but I'm pretty sure you did."

The Las all cheered.

"I wanted to ask," he said, "about your plans."

"Plans?" Lasca asked.

"Yeah, plans. I need to get to False Gate, on the other side of Hell. A mission to save the world." He held out his palms to them. "Wanna come?" It was the most ridiculous way to explain the problem, but then there was no getting around the fact that imps and grems weren't exactly brilliant. Simple and to the point, was best.