

~~Mia~~

“Don’t kill that one?” Julisa asked. “Why? It’s a cannam egg.”

“Yeah, but... but it came out when I approached. Was, er, birthed.” Mia patted the egg. Yeap, moist. Gross. It was over a foot tall, bigger than the other cannam eggs, and its leathery skin had bumps and grooves along it, like veins. The red blemishes on the nearly black skin were slightly see-through, just enough for her to see that there was something inside the egg.

“And?” Shrugging, Julisa approached, each step making a squashing sound as her gore-soaked T-Rex feet pressed down against the muscly floor.

“I don’t know. I was... I don’t want to say I was called, but... there’s something about the nest that I can feel. It responded to me.” Mia gestured around at the flesh walls and the orifices they held. None of them were moving, as if afraid to lay any eggs while demons were around, or maybe unable to, drained, and with time they’d birth a new swarm of hellbeasts to replace the recently dead. Probably the latter, if the history of this mountain was true.

All the demons looked between each other, confused. Even Vinicius raised a brow, though with his demony dragony face, he couldn’t raise it very much.

“I don’t know!” Mia said. “I don’t know what’s going on, okay? I don’t know shit. All I know is, when I was in the spire, I didn’t really feel much, but down here, I... kinda... do? It’s so subtle, but it’s there, and it took me here. I can still feel it.”

“From the egg?” Faust asked.

“No! From the walls! From the... flesh.” She reached out and pressed a hand against it. Just like the egg, it had the slightest bit of wetness, like a weeping wound, and was just as warm. “You don’t feel anything?” The demons shook their heads. “Well, I feel something! And now there’s this egg, and... and... I wanna see it hatch.”

“No you do not,” Julisa said, and she came closer. “Cannams are not goorts. Some provinces raise goorts to be ridden, but even then, that is a difficult process, and demons often die trying. But tamed cannams are beyond rare.”

“Really? I mean, they’re dogs, right? Sounds like they’d be easier to tame.”

“They are not. Did you not see their ferocity mere hours ago?”

“I suppose.” Frowning, Mia squatted down by the egg again and patted it again. “I can’t just ignore this, though. It has to mean, something, right? I... wanna take the egg back with me.”

Julisa snorted, like an annoyed bull. Every incubus winced.

“You sure?” Oudoceus asked. “It’s not going to hatch a puppy.”

“How big would it be when it hatches?”

“Smaller than the ones you’ve seen,” Gallius said, “but demons and hellbeasts aren’t born children. More like, half children, half adult?”

“Teenagers?”

“Ha, something like that.” He and Faust both joined her at the egg, and they poked it with their tails and their devil spade tips. “It’ll hatch and the hellhound will start at least as big as a... uh... what’s that breed of dog people in the scrying pool say belongs to a queen?”

“Belongs to a queen? What—oh! A corgi! A Pembroke Welsh corgi!” Mia jumped up and clapped. “That’s—”

“Not what it’ll look like,” Faust said. “It’ll look like one of those ferocious giant beasts that almost ate you an hour ago. Black spikes, huge teeth, wolf-like?”

“But,” Gallius said, “it’ll start off as big as a, uh, corgi, judging from the size of the egg. And it will grow quickly.”

Faust gently backhanded Gallius in the shoulder.

“When did you see a cannam hatch?”

“Remember Trissa?”

“I do.”

“Remember she showed up missing an arm one day, and refused to tell anyone what happened?”

“Oh. I didn’t think—”

Julisa snarled and marched up to the egg. Mia put herself between the egg and the giant demoness and glared up at her, which apparently caught the fujara tetrad off guard. It wasn’t the first time the demons had been surprised a harmless little soul had had the gal to stand up to them. And if it wasn’t for the child of Belial directly behind Julisa, Mia wouldn’t have.

Vin reached out, grabbed Julisa by her shoulder, and yanked her back. Yank was a generous word, considering the tetrad crashed into the muscle floor and slid across it a good fifty feet, right across a pile

of the gore she'd made. She hopped back to her feet, marched up to Vin, and roared right up into his face. He glared back down at her, rumbling, hands at the ready.

After a few uncomfortable seconds, Mia's leg muscles ready to bolt, Julisa grinned up at the colossus, licked her lips, and stepped back.

"It's your life, little soul," she said, peeking past Vin to smile at Mia. "Romakus won't like this."

"Maybe," Locutus said, "maybe not. He does like to see—"

"Chaos?" Oudoceus asked, laughing.

Julisa laughed, too, and joined the other two incubi as she wiped blood and chunks of flesh off her armor and spikes.

"If she insists on keeping the egg," the tetrad said, "then I suppose we should let her. We let her keep the ragarin's leash, after all. She's the Damall's favorite."

That sounded a little close to envy. It was kinda true that Mia had basically showed up one day and became the center of attention, but Julisa was a tetrad! A badass! She was in full control of everyone and everything around her. Mia felt like a rubber duck someone had thrown into whitewater rapids.

Vin rumbled softly, squatted down in front of the egg, and slid a hand toward it. Mia braced to use the leash, but a quick glance into her bodyguard's eyes settled her nerves. He scooped the egg up. Oh, maybe he was going to carry it and—

And then he put it in her arms. So much for helping her. It was heavy, and gross, and big, and unwieldy, and gross, and heavy. She fell, straight onto her ass, and squeaked as she clutched the egg to her chest. It'd probably survive falling, given its leathery texture, but she wasn't about to risk hurting the thing inside.

Why did she care about the thing inside? Dumb question. Show her anything young with a heartbeat and she'd care, care until it hurt, especially animals. Nature documentaries with predators and prey were enough to make her angry and sad as an adult, and enough to make her weep as a child. But even that wasn't enough reason for her to risk her life hatching a hellhound's egg.

And yet here she was, on her ass on a floor made of muscle, cradling a giant egg on her lap with something alive in it that would likely try to kill her the moment it hatched. It was stupid. She was stupid.

She got back up, glared up at Vin, hugged the egg close, stroked it, and gave each other demon a warning glare, too.

“I’m not going to ignore what happened. I felt something. I followed it down here. And then an egg gets birthed right in front of me? A big one? You can’t tell me you’re not curious.”

The two big demons traded quick glances. They weren’t convinced.

Faust raised a hand. “I’m curious.”

The other incubi eventually raised their hands, but it was obvious Gallius’s story of potential arm-losing had turned them off to the idea.

“We even sure it’s a hellhound?” Locutus asked, gesturing to it. “Nests usually birth the same sort of hellbeasts, so sure, it’s probably a hellhound, and there are probably other, further nests down here, birthing goorts and fallos. But it’s not like we know that for sure. It could just be a goort. Big enough egg for it.”

Vinicius spoke next. “I smell cannam.” He took a deep sniff, not even bothering to lean in for a close one. “Cannam.”

Mia smiled down at the egg and hugged it a little tighter. It had just enough give to its texture that it almost felt like a warm leather couch, but not enough give she could sink her fingers into it.

“I’ll make sure it’s not a problem,” Mia said. “Okay?”

Julisa sighed and rolled her eyes, but relented with a four-arm shrugged, and gestured to the path they’d come from. Mia beamed up at her, hugged the egg snug, did her best to ignore the moistness of it, and headed back.

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“The fuck is this?” Romakus asked. He sat with Livian in an alcove with some other demons, and the two tetrads both tossed a heart into their mouths. They’d come back from a hunt, and judging from the sizes of the hearts, they’d killed some souls. Mia hadn’t even seen a soul in days. How’d they find some to eat in a matter of hours?

“A hellhound egg!” Mia said, and she hugged it tight as she looked around at all the demons. Might as well get this out of the way. “I’m gonna hatch it.”

The two tetrads raised eyebrows.

“I’m sorry, what?” Livian asked.

“I’m gonna hatch it! I went down the tunnel on a hunch, and we found a big nest. There were probably more, but we stopped at the first one, full of hellhound eggs.” She glared back over her shoulder at Julisa.

Of course, Julisa thought Mia’s anger was funny, and she laughed as she sat down with her two tetrad buddies.

“I wiped them out,” Julisa said. “Hell will probably just produce more, more quickly to compensate, but…” She shrugged.

“And you allowed this?” Romakus asked, looking past Mia to the incubi.

“Hey, you told us to keep her alive,” Gallius said. “We did that.”

Romakus laughed, shook out his wings, and leaned forward as he squatted down in front of Mia.

“You’re sure that’s a cannam egg?”

“We’re pretty sure, yeah.”

“And they told you how hard cannam are to tame?”

“They did, yeah.”

“And they told you cannam have a habit of biting and tearing anything they can get their teeth on from a young age?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

“And they told you hellbeasts aren’t surface animals? They get mean, very quickly.”

She frowned down at the egg and hugged it again.

“There’s a reason I found this egg. I don’t know what it is yet, but I want to find out. I’ll be careful. If it’s a problem, I’ll take care of it.”

The gorujin tetrad laughed as he gestured past her to the colossus towering over them all.

“You mean your bodyguard will.”

“No, I will!”

Predictably, that got her more laughter, from all the tetrads.

“Mia, my dear little unmarked soul, you are the most harmless human to ever enter Hell. Literally. And you expect to murder a hellhound if needed? You didn’t see how much trouble we had?”

“I... I saw.”

“Not to mention a hellhound you hatched yourself. You think you can handle that?”

“I don’t know. I just know that something drew me down into the tunnel, and when I visited, this thing came plopping out right in front of me.” She waved the egg around, gently, careful to not jostle the deadly little puppy inside. “Maybe the nest responded to my presence?”

“Maybe,” Livian said. “You know who else is running around with an unusual ability to tame hellbeasts?”

Mia froze, body going cold. “The... the rider.”

“The rider,” Romakus said with a big jackass grin. “Interesting, to say the least.”

“I’m not the rider! The rider was... his aura was...” She stomped her foot, and marched out of the alcove. “I’m not like him!”

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She and the four incubi sat together in her alcove, while Vinicius sat back against the wall, far away enough he was free to ignore them, close enough he could reach out and crush an incubus if needed. He’d growled at the incubi earlier, too. Was he being protective of her? Because that was pretty awesome if true, but also, problematic. She needed a protector, but not one that made enemies.

Why he was being possessive of her, if he even was, was an entirely different question with a bunch of ramifications she didn’t want to think about right now. She had a bigger problem! A problem she’d scooped up entirely of her own choice.

“How long will it take to hatch?” she asked, legs apart and egg sitting on the ground between her and her new friends.

“Not sure,” Faust said. “In the Scar, there are fallo nests we keep under control. The spiders hatch about a month after birth.”

“A month. But, for a spider. Mammals—well, hellbeasts aren’t mammals, but, uh, probably longer?”

“Probably,” Gallius said. “You’re gonna drag it around with you everywhere?”

“I mean... I guess? It’s not super heavy. Maybe fifteen kilos?” With a big smile, she held her arms out at her sides and flexed her biceps. “I can handle it.”

The incubi all oohed and aahed, and nodded between themselves, impressed by her immense strength.

She liked these guys. They were fun.

“It’s pretty large, though,” Locutus said. “Unwieldy.”

“I’ve been thinking about that. It’s pretty common in some places in the world for moms to work fields, even with a tiny baby. They usually keep them in some sort of shoulder sling, or more complicated ones that go over both shoulders and hold the baby to the chest. Can we make something like that?”

Oudoceus laughed. “It’s not a baby. I don’t think you’ll need to be that careful with it. As long as you don’t drop it too hard, on rock, it should be fine.”

“True,” Faust said. “Hellbeasts aren’t fragile, eggs included.”

Mia frowned down at the egg and gently ran her fingers around its contours.

“I dunno. It’s still an egg, right? And there’s something alive inside it. I don’t want it to get knocked around and hurt and stuff.”

Gallius reached out and touched the egg, and Mia slapped the back of his hand. He laughed and withdrew his evil digits.

“I hope you know the responsibility you’ve picked up, here,” Faust said. “You have to go on a journey to save the world, right? You really want to carry this egg around? And then it’s going to hatch and you’re going to have to feed it.”

“I’ve thought about it. I have to feed Vin, right? The puppy can join him.”

Vinicius growled and looked to the side. His tail was as still as a rock. He didn’t like the idea.

“Not a puppy,” Gallius said. “I mean, mostly not a puppy.”

“Dogs are always puppy. Puppy puppers. They never grow up.”

The incubi looked between each other, wincing.

“Did you not see what the cannams did? Those fights can go a lot worse. Hellbeasts kill demons, often.”

She mirrored the wince, but pulled the egg closer to her, anyway.

“I’ll raise him to be nice!”

They all looked at each other again, clearly not believing her. She didn’t really believe herself, either. Every hellbeast she’d ever seen had been a bloodthirsty, hungry, raging animal, be it goorts or wurms or fallo spiders or hellhounds. That’d be no good to her, and potentially deadly to her. It wouldn’t be the first time a human had adopted an odd animal, and of course it grew up to kill or at least maim the owner, eventually. There was a reason a lot of animals were illegal to own, on the surface.

“Okay, I don’t know if he’ll be nice,” she said. “He’ll—”

“He?” Faust asked.

“I... uh, I guess that doesn’t fit, does it?” She shrugged and patted the egg. “Whatever. He’ll be my pupper.”

“Pupp—”

“Pupper! All wolves and dogs are puppies, even the deadly ones.” They’d never understand the strange, mindless devotion humans had to dogs. “Come on, I’m not an idiot. I know this is going to be dangerous, and probably a problem, but I can’t ignore what happened. This egg means something!”

“Can you still feel the nest?” Oudoceus asked.

“No. I mean, kinda? If I had to, I think I could follow the feeling back to the nest, but it’s so subtle. And when I was down there, I felt more of the same, in other places. I was... sensing the nests, I guess. All the nearby ones.”

“Not the egg?”

“No, it was the nests. But the nest responded to me! I think. It felt strange, where the egg was born, and... yeah.” She patted the egg a couple more times, gently of course, and the puppy inside stirred. “I’m getting slammed with so many weird quirks about me, what I am, and a part of me just wants to hide and pretend I’m not strange. I’ve never been the center of so much attention.” David was probably hating every moment of being the center of attention. Loving the sex powers? Probably. Center of attention? Kryptonite. “But, this is important, save the universe important, and I’m not going to hide from it.”

“Brave,” Gallius said.

Mia laughed and leaned over her egg so she could smile at the incubi.

“I mean, come on! How many stories have you read about a protagonist who does everything they can to avoid accepting their fate? They run around in circles, deny obvious stuff, and are absolutely convinced the crazy things that keep happening have nothing to do with them.” They raised eyebrows, not understanding. “I have to accept it. I’m special, or cursed. Either way, I will not stick my head in the sand and pretend shit doesn’t seem to be happening specifically to me, or because of me, or something. Me and the other unmarked, wherever they may be.”

“Brave and smart,” Locutus said. “I mean, you are unmarked, and wearing an angel rune.”

“Yosepha wishes her potram was as sexy as yours,” Faust said, smile turning devious. All it took was a playful, handsome smile to bring back the memory of him and Gallius, erect, looking Mia up and down after she’d come back from seeing the angel and gorujin fucking.

She clutched the egg, her egg, and frowned at him. But try as she might, she couldn’t keep it up as Faust smiled right back at her. Damn sexy mischievous bastard.

“The four of you would want to fuck that angel even if she was still in her armor,” she said. “Horndogs.”

“True,” Oudoceus said. “Silver and gold armor are pretty sexy.”

They all laughed. God, to just laugh again was amazing.

Mia looked down at her egg, squinted at it, and found movement. The creature inside was definitely alive, the leathery skin thin enough she could just ever so barely make out the shape of something inside. It was small, but it’d grow, like any creature in an egg did.

Hopefully, this wouldn’t end up like that twisted idea she’d once heard, where special agents in training had to raise a puppy, only to have to kill it to complete their training. She didn’t know if it was true, but the thought was enough to make her want to puke, literally. That wouldn’t happen to her, no way. If the hellhound couldn’t be tamed, she’d just release it somewhere far away.

And besides, it wasn’t like Hell would set her up just to be miserable like that. Would she?

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~~David~~

The path ahead was low in vines, but high in remnants. They found the remains of vines, too, as if someone had taken an axe to them to clear the path. Probably accurate.

“I can smell them,” Caera said, bringing her nose to the ground. It was mostly a human nose, but with a slight cat-ish snout, and fit the whole ‘tiger lady’ shape of her well. He liked it.

“Sure you don’t want me to wear the armor again?” he asked. “I can—”

“No. We know where they are. We know who their leader is. We know what they can do. All that’s left now is to kill them all, and if we have to run past you to make that happen, you could get hurt. If we use a sin aura, the Cainites might attack you even if they didn’t want to. Better you just stay back.” She gestured back with her tail toward the following demons. “We’re ready.”

They were ready. He had his dagger. Las had found small swords, bigger than his dagger, heavier, but they were strong enough to wield them one-handed. Daoka didn’t have a weapon, but she didn’t need one with her horns. Jeskura didn’t need one either, but she took a sword, too. Most surprisingly was Acelina, armed with a giant axe, one even a Cainite would have struggled to wield. On top of that, she’d found armor, big chunks of black metal they’d strapped onto her body to cover her breasts, thank god, some of her stomach, her quads, and, most importantly, her shins. She had the longest legs, hardest to guard, especially from thorny vines

“When we find them,” Caera said, “stay with Acelina.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“I mean it, David. Unless you can pull some magical power out of your ass, stay out of the way as much as you can.”

“Yes ma’am.”

She looked back over her spiky shoulder at him, frowning, but it melted as he gave her his best military salute.

“We protect!” Lasca said.

Caera shook her head. “No. If you want to help us, if you want revenge on the Cainites, we need you on the flanks.”

“Flanks?” Laara asked.

“Fla—just, when I get in there, surround the Cainites from the outside. Their lefts and rights, or high up, okay? Daoka and Jeskura will follow me in down the center, but the four of you should go in on the flanks. Acelina comes in after. Clean up.”

“Problem,” Jes said. “This is all assuming we just... find them, in a big room, standing around talking to each other.”

“I know the layout of the temple grounds. The tactic will work.”

“Unless they have archers,” David said. “But, that doesn’t seem to be a thing in Hell, does it?”

“No,” Caera said. “Too difficult to make any of the parts. Burning bushes are too brittle, and there’s no good way to make string. And then there’s the arrows. No one’s figured those out.”

“Makes sense. You can’t fire an arrow straight without fletching, and I can’t even begin to imagine what you’d make that out of. Feathers? Does Hell have feathers? And—”

Jes slapped him in the back, but also came in for a quick kiss on the cheek.

“Just stay out of the way,” she said. “If you die, then who knows what the fuck will happen to the rest of us?”

“Maybe other unmarked will make the journey? Maybe Mia will?”

“Maybe. Or maybe you just listen to us, and stay back.” She pulled on his shoulder strap with her wing claw, and he had to step back to keep from falling on his ass. Daoka and the Las guided him until he stood in the back with Acelina. They resumed the journey.

He took a moment to look Acelina up and down. The armor fit her well enough. No one talked about how it was Renato’s armor, the only stuff big enough to fit her height and curves. And as much as she kinda looked really, really sexy, with her larger parts covered in the bent sheets of metal held snug by leather straps, he couldn’t get aroused knowing where it’d come from.

The demons marched on, ready for a battle where any of them could die. Fearless. Courageous. Was it courageous if you felt no fear? Were they actually fearless, or just great at suppressing it? He was fucking terrified, but he was doing what he always did, intellectualizing, taking his emotions and putting them in a box. He could open it later and have a mental breakdown where it wouldn’t get him killed.

The march continued on at a good pace, since Cainites cleared the vines out. No one talked, even the Las, and normally the little ladies talked incessantly; usually as tiny, innocent chirps with each other, but enough to get on Acelina’s nerves. Now they said nothing.

It was pretty amazing, thinking about it, how quickly the four Las had adapted to their group dynamic. The other imps and grems they’d run into had wanted no part of their band of merry adventurers, and were much happier avoiding the Cainites entirely. Some had even been violent, and if

it hadn't been for the Las, probably would have made for quick snacks for Caera and the gang. But they'd run off once they'd realized David and the girls were all together. Unpredictable, like Jes said. But the Las were proving very dependable, relative to other imps and grems. He'd have to ask them about themselves, later.

Caera gestured for them to get down but keep going, and they did. Or they tried, anyway. The tregeera had an easy time of it, already going on four legs, but everyone else had to crouch. Acelina had the hardest time, and eventually she fell back far enough she was behind David. Slow and steady, not a word, not a click.

Voices ahead sent heat through David's body, mixing with a cold chill, like rage mixing with adrenaline. Everyone slowed down even more, and Caera prowled ahead like a tiger getting closer to prey. There'd been plenty of tunnels to take, but Caera had picked this one specifically.

Good thing she did. It opened up in a higher position than David figured, with a big cavern awaiting them below, with slopes that almost looked like stairs connecting the cavern to other tunnel holes. They'd come in on the highest one, and below, Cainites drifted around to lower tunnels, weapons in their arms or resting on their shoulders as they went out on hunts.

One side of the cavern was flat. No, not flat. He stared at the distant wall, barely illuminated by the amber veins along the cave wall around it, until the strange shape clicked in his head.

It was a temple. Someone had carved a temple out of the stone, someone with an obsession with bones, and Gothic architecture. Except, whoever carved it — probably Belial — had done so long before 12th century. The temple also looked darker than most of Death's Grip's rocky surface, almost like it was made entirely of blackstone.

To make meera metal, blackstone and demon bones were mixed and forged together. Blackstone was something in the dirt, mixed in with rocks and stuff, which was why all the ground and stone in Death's Grip — and probably all of Hell — had a really dark color, forever kinda black and kinda red. Seeing an entire temple made of blackstone was really fucking weird, and it flickered slightly where amber veins grew near.

Its face connected to the cavern ceiling, and judging from the windows, the temple, or at least the front facing part, had two floors, each at least thirty feet tall. According to Caera, there were hallway tunnels inside it that went down, too.

How the fuck did someone carve this?

Their tunnel exit was high enough and dark enough that the Cainites below couldn't see them, and weren't scaling the slopes to get to it. Not worth the effort to monitor the tunnel, since it wasn't like a group of demons would be suicidal enough to throw themselves at an army of Cainites armed with imbued weapons. And any demons that came running down the slope would probably run straight into Cainite swords.

"We have to get inside," Caera whispered.

"Or draw them out," Jes said, crouched low beside her. "How do you want to do this? We can still send David in and—"

"David pretending to be a lone Cainite, wandering around, was fine for getting info from others, out in the tunnels. But here? They're all in squads and organized." Caera nodded down toward the groups. She was right. Every Cainite moved with a group of others, and every one of them had one person with an imbued weapon, glowing like a tiny candle in the distance. "We have to get closer, and we have to kill them all. An ambush is the only option."

Daoka clicked quietly and gestured down.

"Maybe," Caera said. "There's a lot of them, and they're prepared. It's not like last time I was here. We were in the temple when they swarmed us, and it was chaos. This is like a small army, patrolling."

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.

"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.”

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.”

“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.

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 bailiff 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."

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 hyperventilate.

“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.”

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.

“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.

“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.

There were pillars everywhere, colossal things covered in bones from top to bottom, and from their size, femur bones. They were darker than bone usually was, as if they'd been burned. Huge, skull-shaped braziers dangled from the high ceiling on black chains, flames billowing in their eyes. The walls were decorated with skulls hanging from hooks, all demon, and there were plenty of them. The Cainites had been busy.

The main chamber was vast, and long, with plenty of space on either side for a congregation of demons of all shapes and sizes. It'd been mostly empty before, but now it filled with Cainites following David and the girl in, but also from the stairways alongside the building walls where more archways led to hallways. Caera had said the building had floors, above and below.

The girls wouldn't have to worry about hunting them down, though, with what looked like a borderline riot as Cainites poured into the giant room, filling in the spaces along each wall, while more flowed in behind David, ushering him forward toward the pulpit and anvil. Everyone wanted to see.

The pulpit was enormous and tall. No human used that. It stood on a short stage raised by two large steps on all sides, very much like something he'd seen in a church. A pipe organ on the wall behind it, instead of the various stairways and archways, would have fit perfectly.

Below and in front of the pulpit was an anvil, a bit larger than the classic kind you'd find in fantasy stories, with a dozen human skulls carved into its black base. Underneath it ran a thick amber vein, each end disappearing into sculpted holes in the ground, like a long glowing electric wire the anvil sat on. Or was tapping into.

A man stood beside the pulpit. Like David, he didn't wear much of the meera metal; maybe he struggled with the weight, too. He wore leather instead, like David's skirt, except also across his chest. Someone had made him clothes.

He had a book in his hand, leather-bound, and he turned the thick pages, eyes locked on the book with interest. He was a tall guy, short black hair, some scruff, fit and athletic. An all around handsome guy, with no number on his forehead.

He raised his eyes from the book, and the gaze he set on David shattered what thoughts David might have had about this guy. There was something weird in his gaze, something straight out of American Psycho.

"Janette?" he asked.

"Gregory! This guy found the temple, no escort. He says some other Cainites were with him when they got killed." She nudged David forward. "He's unmarked, too."

"Another unmarked? So the rumors are true." Greg closed the book and set it on the pulpit; he had to reach high to do it. "Imps and grems have been going around, talking about unmarked and a great calamity that hit the Death's Grip spire." Sighing, he sat down on the large stairs alongside the short stage, and motioned for Janette to step back from David.

"I saw it," David said, doing his best to not rub his arm or scratch his head or shift his weight back and forth on his toes. "Big crack, split Death's Grip from inner to outer edge. It was terrifying."

"That's what I've heard." Greg nodded as he looked out at the gathering group. "The other unmarked haven't made themselves known, though. No one's risen to guide these people or to fix their problems. Where have you been?"

Is that what this guy thought an unmarked's purpose was?

"I... didn't arrive in Hell until recently."

"Is that so?" Greg eyed him, and again, the icy cold of the man's dead gaze cut through David's guts and dumped them on the floor. "Then I suppose you have a lot to learn about Hell... What is your name?"

“David,” Janette said for him.

“David. How biblical.” The other unmarked chuckled, and it carried no joy. “You—”

The temple rumbled. David’s body froze, every muscle tensed, and he looked up as the hanging skull braziers jiggled on their chains. The rumbling passed quickly, and Greg looked around with a raised eyebrow. He didn’t look nearly as confused as David had hoped. Maybe the mystery woman had talked to him, too?

Everyone grew quiet, and David strained his ears, but heard no sign of Caera and the girls. More Cainites pushed into the temple, and while they gave plenty of space to Greg and David, they felt comfortable enough to get up on the stage. They wanted to see, though at the moment, they were all looking up and around with wide eyes.

“It’s happening again?” Janette asked. Like a match on oil, everyone started talking.

“Maybe,” Greg said, and he raised a hand. The crowd grew quiet, and a tiny smile graced the crazy man’s lips. Yeah, this guy had a god complex. “Do you know what our mission is, fellow unmarked?”

“I... do not.”

Greg nodded, face serious and calm, like a priest’s.

“I found the Cainites... or I suppose, they found me, not long ago. When they realized I could craft auras, as I’m sure you’ve realized you can, they thought maybe I was special. I insisted there had to be others like me; the angels said as much on the stairs to Heaven. The Cainites brought me here.” Greg gestured to the pulpit he’d put the book on. “Have you found any other books?”

“Books? No.”

“The Old Ones wrote books, because... well, because they had to, I suppose.” He stepped around the anvil, stood in front of David, and folded his arms across his chest. “Something about the power of words. I don’t know for sure. But regardless, the Cainites and I are going to create an army, find more books, take over the spires, and all of Hell. Then, Heaven. The Cainites want angel hearts, convinced they’re the key to great power. I’m thinking they might be right. No place we’ll find more of those than Heaven, right?”

What. The. Fuck.

The crowd cheered.

“Death to the angels!”

“Cain’s path will be followed!”

“We’ll feast!”

David forced down the urge to gulp or stare too hard at the absolute madman talking about the most ridiculous shit he’d ever heard. And the Cainites believed him. Maybe they were so drunk on their ridiculous religion and demon hearts combined, they were into the idea of assaulting Heaven. Or... they’d convinced Greg? They sounded like a cult. A deluded, mindless cult.

A cult in a post-apocalyptic environment had always seemed like a dumb trope. But, David wasn’t most people. For him, it was a given people would naturally start relying purely on their intelligence, and make only quality, evidence-based decisions in a post-apoc setting, when literally any and every moment could spell their last. Who the fuck throws away science and reasoning and joins a cult the moment nukes get dropped?

Except this wasn’t some post-apoc setting where people did random, weird shit. It was Hell. If you had a group of literal murderers in the afterlife getting stronger by eating demon hearts, and you apparently had a religion passed on by word of mouth about some super powerful guy from the Christian bible, who apparently ate angel hearts to become super powerful in Hell, maybe becoming a part of the cult made more sense.

Greg grinned. “I know, I know. Thinking too big, right? I’m just testing the water. See how you react.”

No more people forced their way into the temple, the archway tunnel entrance completely clogged. This was everyone, then, or everyone nearby. Any time now, Caera.

“I... don’t know,” David said. “I didn’t really think about it.”

“How many hearts have you eaten?”

“Just one.”

“What kind?”

“Kind? Um, a man’s.”

“A human man’s?” he asked.

“Y-Yeah.” Come on, girls. He could only stall for so long.

“Well, once you’ve eaten a few demon hearts, you’ll get a taste for it. The Cainites don’t experience the memories, but I bet you will.” Greg licked his lips as he looked at David’s forehead.

“You’ll feel them buzz through you. It’ll only take a few, and then you’ll crave the memories they give you.”

What the fuck what the fuck what the fuck.

“So... what now?” David asked.

“Not sure. We’ve been working on clearing out this mountain of any more of that Renato fucker’s friends.”

“Renato?”

“Yes.” Greg gestured to the side of the cathedral, and a few dozen Cainites stepped out of the way. A collection of demon skulls sat on a black table, including a particularly large one. “And we’ve been collecting souls for the anvil.” Nodding, he patted the anvil before sitting on it.

“Souls... for the anvil?”

“Correct. Can’t make hellfire weapons without human souls.”

Something went click in David’s brain. The anvil rune and the hellfire rune aligned with another rune. Souls. The soul rune in his brain was beyond complicated, with resonance and essence coiling around inside it, a knot of lines he had no chance of understanding. But something about the anvil rune lined up with it, and hellfire, and the concept of catalyst and implement he picked up earlier from the imbued weapon. And—

“So. Dilemma,” Greg said. “You’re here, another unmarked. I don’t know what to do with you. I’m committed to the Cainites, and I’ve proved it a dozen times over. I don’t know anything about you, except that you’re unmarked like me. You probably have all the same powers I do.” Nodding, Greg turned around, set both hands on the anvil, and tapped on it a couple times with a knuckle. He held out a hand to the side, and Janette put David’s dagger in his palm. “For all I know, you’ll use your powers to betray me. Betray us.”

Fuuuuuck. Caera? Jeskura? Dao? Help?

“I wouldn’t. I—”

“You came here looking for help, because the Cainites who found you told you about me. About us. How do I know you didn’t betray them and get them killed?”

“I—”

“I think my loyal congregation, armed with hellfire, armed by me, would not succumb to some random group of demons. And even if they did, demons would have run you down, David, followed your scent, and killed or captured you. Escape wouldn’t have been possible.” He slowly turned and faced David, dagger at his side. “You’re a liar, David. So are many of us; we’re in Hell, after all. But anyone who lies and puts the congregation at risk, dies.”

“You sure?” Janette asked. “He’s unmarked. Maybe he can be useful. He might even—”

Greg eyed the woman, and she reared back as if he’d struck her.

“You... do make a good point, Janette. I am certain he lied to get here, but it would be a waste to simply kill him.” Greg gestured to the Cainites behind David. They stepped forward and grabbed his wrists. Double fuck. “Let’s see what a weapon imbued with the power of an unmarked soul can do.”

Okay, time to panic.

“Help!” David yelled, pulling on the grip of the Cainites holding him. He wasn’t going anywhere. “Someone fucking help!” Was that a good signal? They hadn’t agreed on a signal. Maybe he should have cawed like a bird?

Greg laughed. Janette laughed. The Cainites laughed. How were these people so fucked up?

Screams erupted from behind, and all the Cainites spun around. Without hesitation, they drew their weapons, and more than a few of them glowed red. One of the two Cainites holding David let go, and the other turned, letting David see the backs of a dozen Cainites, and a hint of the dark archway they’d come through.

Oh thank god, the girls were coming.

Something moved in the archway. David waited to see black horns and red eyes, but something white cut through the shadow instead. Something gold erupted in the darkness, and it came at them like a comet.

David threw himself to the ground and yanked the Cainite holding him down with him. Gold light crashed overhead, ripping through Cainite bodies and crashing against the blackstone pulpit. The pulpit withstood the crashing beam of light, but it tore through flesh like an explosion, burning and crashing at the same time. Loud, but not ear-splitting loud, the temple rumbled with the impact, and Cainites fell over each other. More than a few screamed out as they were stabbed, falling onto weapons, or weapons falling onto them.

“What the hell?” Greg yelled, and he climbed back up, too. Janette had thrown herself his way and pushed him down.

Janette didn't have a head anymore.

Greg pushed the woman's corpse off him, eyes wide with rage. Not surprise. Rage.

“You brought them here!?” he yelled, straight down at David. “That woman was right! I should have killed you on sight!”

The mystery woman?

“I—”

White feathers filled the enormous room, movement above, fast and blinding with gold light. The clang of metal filled the cathedral, echoing against the metal-like mineral, and Cainites screamed and roared as they broke into a riot. They were fighting something else, in the archway, and with weapons held high, whoever was in there couldn't fly past. But one already had, and they hovered in the cathedral, radiant armor of silver and gold almost glowing as it reflected the red light of the braziers.

“Unmarked ones,” the angel said, “surrender your lives.” A man glared down at them through his helmet, the t-slit of its front too dark to see anything within, except the glaring, beautiful blue sapphire eyes of the angel within.

The angel didn't get to continue. Cainites flowed through the huge room, and they looked up at their new target with wide, hungry eyes.

“Angel!” they yelled. “Angel! Kill! Eat!”

The angel turned to face the swarm, but he was too high to hit. Except, not really. A couple dozen feet in the air was as high as the angel could hover freely, and he had to be careful of all the hanging braziers and chains. Combined with the inner balcony that circled the immense room filling up with Cainites pouring up from the ground floor, he wasn't safe.

Fighting continued on outside, dozens of the Cainites having run out to fight another angel, but there were plenty left inside to chase the angel threatening their leader. They threw their swords, daggers, and axes, somehow finding the strength to chuck the ridiculously heavy weapons at the angel. Pointless. The angel dodged around most, and knocked others aside with his shield or wings, angled just right to avoid anything sharp hitting his wings' arms.

It was beautiful. David stared up at the gorgeous creature of grace and power, how he dove left and right around the hanging chains, and how he turned his sword to aim at the Cainites on the balcony

like a scene from a movie. Carnage followed. Body parts already littered the ground around David, and a rain of new ones joined them as the angel dove onto the balcony. Heads, arms, some legs, they fell around him onto the Cainites, and it wasn't long before blood drenched everything.

The angel blocked an imbued weapon, causing a cloud of fire to erupt through the upper half of the cathedral, and the angel laughed. Ice ran down David's spine. Angels weren't supposed to laugh, not like that.

"What have you done!?" Greg pushed past other Cainites and through the growing mess of gore before reaching down and grabbing David by the shoulders. He'd dropped his knife.

Even if he hadn't, the jolt that ran between them would have made him drop it. Every muscle in David's body flexed and unflexed as magical electricity coursed through his skin, into his spine, and up into his brain. As it did, electricity flowed through him, back out into Greg. The knowledge repertoire put there by his sister entered Greg, each rune shining in David's skull for a second, letting him know it was being copied and pasted into someone else.

Greg's information didn't send any new runes to David, but lit up a path between them. Runes clicked into place, or rather, the chains that connected them lit up, and his mind automatically knew how to re-arrange them to create a working system. Like, making his own custom circuit board.

If you wanted to imbue a weapon with the power of hellfire, you needed to sacrifice a soul. When you sacrificed a soul, you basically triggered a fission explosion of the components by smashing them together against the special anvil. Resonance went one way, essence went the other, and the soul that bound and controlled them dispersed into the ether. Not destroyed, but gone, leaving behind the remains of an explosion of the two components, free to destroy everything they touched, but trapped in the weapon.

And David could trigger that explosion. Trigger it, and contain it in a weapon. And sync it with... someone else's... existence? Like a cable with a specific connector?

"The fuck was that?" Greg asked. "What is—"

The cathedral rumbled. The ground shook. The Cainites all released a gasp, and soon tumbled as the hellquake ripped the ground out from under them. It cracked, and tossed bits of blackstone into the air. Not good not good.

David and Greg went down again, each on their knees, and others joined them as the floor split apart. The amber vein that cut along the floor broke, and lava oozed from what almost looked like a glass coating. It didn't flow fast, but it did flow, trickling down along the black floor in all directions,

some flowing down into the giant crack growing in the cathedral, while more flowed toward the Cainites.

It only got worse. The crack grew, and the rumbling doubled until the braziers above clinked against each other. The angel above them jumped off the balcony, or fell off, and landed on their feet with the harsh clank of metal boots. Beside the pulpit, he was only a dozen feet away from Greg and David, and he bolted for them, wings spread.

He got two feet before a host of limbs got between Greg and the angel, and threw themselves at the winged man. Their weapons came down, crashed against the angel's shield, and were thrown back. The angel struck out with his sword, but one Cainite blocked it with his own, got knocked back, but also knocked the angel's sword back. An opening, and the Cainites took advantage. They brought their weapons down, and only the angel's wings sending him back were enough to stop him from getting hit by huge, heavy axes and swords. He'd made especially sure to avoid a glowing red axe.

So, angels weren't unstoppable warriors of destruction. Even dripping from head to toe in the blood of his victims, something about the knowledge the angel was afraid to get hit painted him in a new light. He wasn't invulnerable. Just a single second of fighting on the defense gave the Cainites the morale boost they needed, and they threw themselves at him. They jumped over the tiny lines of lava that ran along the floor, but not all of them were so lucky, and they fell, screaming, as chunks of their feet burned to a crisp in seconds.

David knew better than to breathe in through his nose.

Three of them swung sword and axe down toward the angel's head, but the angel blocked with his shield, its edges lined with gold and silver, its face a mirror sheen. Cainite superhuman strength forced the angel to root his footing wide, but they weren't strong enough to knock him back or over, even as a wave of fire exploded over his shield from the imbued axe. The angel shoved his shield back in retaliation, Cainite weapons went up, and the angel swiped his sword horizontally. Their torsos fell off their legs.

Just a couple months ago, the sight of humans dying, having their guts literally fall out of open chest cavities, bodies cut in half at the hip, would have scarred David for life. It was just another Tuesday at this point. He blocked out the sounds they made as best he could, and refocused his attention on the bigger problem. Where were his girls, and what the fuck did he do about Greg?

"Enough!" The angel swung his sword out, forcing the Cainites back. His wings erupted in a gold light, and the glow poured down through his body into his sword. He swung it again, and an arc of light shot out from the weapon through the crowd, cutting them apart with the same cruel indifference as his

beam attack moments before. They didn't cut apart so much as get blown apart, and again a rain of gore filled the room.

The ground cracked more, and bits of the cathedral ceiling crumbled, broke off, and fell around them. It wasn't a building, but a cavern that'd been carved. It didn't bend with the vibrations or warp, it just broke, like a rock half sitting in a fire, and shards of blackstone shot out in all directions from the walls and ceiling.

“Moriah! Tzipporah!” the angel yelled. “Quickly, before it happens again!”

Yells, screams, and cries of pain poured in from the other side of the cathedral entrance, but it was full of bodies coming and going, Cainites unsure of what to do. The quake settled the question for them, and layers of the splitting cavern crashed onto them. Rocks fell, stones as big as David's head, and some as big as David, and they broke shoulders and skulls on the way down. The only reason David wasn't crushed was because he knew the quakes were only going to get worse, so he paid attention to the ceiling, and rolled to one side to dodge falling debris.

David picked one rock up.

“Kill the angel, my children!” Greg yelled, dragging himself to his feet. An aura flared out of him, one of rage and defiance. “Eat their hearts and we will end this—”

Greg yelped as someone crashed into his side, someone small with shaggy red hair.

Out-of-body experience? No. David knew what he was doing, saw it through his own eyes, but some part of him had put what was happening in a box. Greg went down, David fell on him, and before Greg could push himself up, David brought the rock down.

His aim was off slightly and hit Greg underneath the back of his skull. The man jerked hard, muscle spasms nearly throwing David off, and the man turned over onto his back. But David stayed on, and slammed the huge rock down with both hands again against the man's face. The following scream became a gargled mess half covered by blood and broken flesh. But he was still alive, and the quakes continued. David smashed the man's face in again and again until bone broke, until something wet coated the rock and his hands, until the rock went in and crashed into something soft inside the broken eggshell of a skull.

The quakes stopped.

Greg was dead. The last hint of his aura flared for a moment before fading into nothingness.

No one noticed. Every Cainite, in and out of the cathedral, was locked in battle, and judging from the sounds, they were losing. The ding and clank of metal hitting metal filled the cracked cathedral, but at least the rumbling had ended. The angel inside was busy, slaughtering endless Cainites, and again his strange laughter cut through the noise of battle. He was enjoying himself.

“Death to the sinners!” he yelled and crashed forward through the crowd. What the fuck was wrong with this angel? He cut through the swarm of Cainites, blood rained down on his huge wings, and the chaos of the fight turned into an orchestrated dance as the angel cleaved through bloodthirsty cultists. And he was coming David’s way.

David stood up and looked around. He refused to look at Greg, but glimpses of his broken skull, and exposed... stuff, past the shell of his face, cut through him into his heart. Nausea flooded him, and he fell back away from the corpse onto more corpses. Rocks everywhere, several giant cracks along the floor, lava trickling between them, and body parts. It was like the battle with the remnants all over again, except these people weren’t remnants.

They were people. Functional, aware, alive — sort of — people. Except now they were more like a teeming mass, a riot, a full-on swarm of insanity and hunger, throwing themselves at the angel in some mindless attempt to get the thing they thought was more important than anything else. All those videos David had seen of people rioting in the streets, doing things they’d normally never do while taken up by the group mind of a swarm, felt so much more real.

He picked up a dagger, ignored the ludicrous weight pulling on his wrist, and moved toward the archway exit. Get up and get out. Put the sights and thoughts in a box, ignore them, and get out.

The anvil? The vein it was connected to was broken. It probably didn’t work anymore. The book? Greg had the information inside him, and had transferred it to David when they touched. Maybe it had more, but no way David was going to go for the book with Cainites and a crazy angel around; plus, the pulpit was really tall and getting the book wouldn’t be easy. Nope, he was done here. Time to run.

It wasn’t any better on the outside of the cathedral. Enough Cainites had stopped going in and out to give him the room to push past, but the reason became abundantly clear once he was outside. Bodies were everywhere, cleaved in two or missing limbs. Others were clawed up, ripped open, eviscerated. Giant boulders had fallen, and the ground was now uneven, tilted by the breaking stone twisted from the violent hellquakes. Blood and weapons covered the ground, and bubbling trickles of lava leaked up from the cracked stone, roasting flesh and boiling blood.

Two angels. Eight demons. Dozens of Cainites. It was a madhouse. The humans came at the angels, screaming and roaring with the same indifference to their own lives as the ones in the cathedral,

and the two angels cut them down. A woman, wearing the same armor as the male angel from before, hovered above before making dive bomb attacks on the Cainites, only to pull up again before they could catch her. But the other angel stood upon the ground, wielding a spear and a shield so tall it was almost as tall as they were. Their armor was so thick, there was no easy way to tell the sex of the angel inside. Even their helmet's t-slit opening was so small, only the barest hint of their emerald eyes pierced through the darkness.

The woman above swung her blade like it was a dance of brutality, and her ruby eyes matched her frown. The angel with the thicker armor and bigger shield stood their ground, blocking dozens of hits from the Cainites, even the imbued weapons and their fiery explosions, while simultaneously stabbing them from behind the safety of their shield. It was the perfect example of why spears were the best melee weapon, historically speaking, but no demon would ever consider combining offense and defense. The Cainites didn't consider it, either.

"David!" Caera's voice. She stood up from the crowd of Cainites and crashed through them, heading straight for him. Blood oozed from a dozen wounds, and one of her eyes was bleeding. Not just bleeding. Gone. Oh no.

"Moriah!" the angel in thicker armor called out, a woman's voice.

Moriah flew down and crashed into the ground in front of David, sword up, and she glared at him as she brought it down. Their eyes met, and her ruby gaze struck him still.

She bowled over, crashing into his side and then to the ground as a giant tiger lady tackled her back. Everyone went down, and the angel's sword and shield clinked loudly as they smashed into the stone. Cainites were everywhere, and they wasted no time jumping at the angel.

David picked himself up fast enough to look up and catch a glimpse of the Las, all four of them, soaring through the air. But, demons couldn't fly? Jeskura, too! She landed on a Cainite, sword first, skewering them like she was a tossed javelin. Before another Cainite got the chance to retaliate, she threw herself back toward the cathedral with a flap of her wings, and scaled its walls of sharp grooves and hollowed-out windows. From up high, she threw herself toward the battle below again, gliding, but she didn't get to land. The angel in the thicker armor dove up to meet her, and drove her spear straight for her chest.

She dodged by a single inch. Gliding wasn't flying, but it was good enough, and she got around the spear and into the angel's face. A mid-air collision knocked the sword out of Jes's hands, but she got one set of her claws latched onto the angel's huge shield, the other onto the side of the spear. The angel flapped her wings, preventing the two of them from falling, and it quickly became apparent the angel

was far stronger. She swung the shield and spear left and right, trying to dislodge the gargoyle, and Jes shrieked in her face as she held on, barely, body flopping around in the air like a flying fish.

The Las avoided the angels, content to hop around, go for Cainite legs with their swords, climb up their backs, and jump into the air to glide around more. They screamed and shrieked, too, distracting but never committing to a fight. The fact they were in the chaos at all was insanity for an imp or grem, from what Jes and Caera had told him.

Even crazier was Acelina. She stood beside Daoka, and... was protecting her. Daoka's clicks filled the giant cavern, somehow able to pierce the chorus of screaming Cainites, and she rammed her horns into the nearest marked soul. A moment later, Acelina brought her axe down on said soul, and they splattered. She cackled, the same way the angel in the cathedral had, and still was. It sounded fitting come from her. It sounded horrific coming from the other angel.

Caera and Moriah weren't beside him anymore. He got to his feet and scampered around, only to trip over a nearby Cainite body. Rock and stone, blood and bones, they were everywhere and his brain couldn't make heads or tails of it as he scanned the throng of bodies for Caera again. A giant tail knocked a Cainite aside, and a set of claws took down another. A glowing gold arc cut out from beside her, and Caera jumped high to get over it as it cut through a half dozen more souls.

The Cainites wanted the angels, but when they couldn't reach them, they settled for the demons instead. Unfortunately for the Cainites, Caera and Jes knew battle inside and out, and Dao and Acelina were more than capable of defending themselves. The fight was chaos, but it was chaos the demons were comfortable in. The angels, not so much, and Jes made that clear as she crawled around the heavier angel's shield, got around behind her, and started clawing at her wings, like some sort of badger, rage incarnate. She was the only reason the heavily armored angel wasn't stabbing David right now.

And Caera was the only reason the Moriah angel hadn't killed him. Again, the angel spotted David, and again she threw herself toward him with a flap of her wings, intent on going up and then down at him, only to get knocked out of the sky by Caera's pounce. Efforts to pin the angel failed, and the smaller woman shoved the giant tiger off her with a single arm and shield. Caera turned over mid-air like a cat, landed on her feet, and pounced again, but Moriah flew high and out of the way.

The angel was covered in blood, and her armor had a dozen dents and claw marks in it. She seemed tired, panting, but uninjured, while all the demons were covered in cuts. Angels were deadly.

"Stop! Stop!" David waved his bloodied hands in the air. "I killed the other unmarked! Greg's dead! Please, stop!"

The angel with the spear was too busy wrestling with Jeskura to hear, but Moriah stopped dead in the sky and stared down at him, hovering. She didn't believe him.

"The quakes stopped!" David gestured at the cathedral and the two giant cracks that ran from its top to bottom. Not only had the quakes stopped, but the violence in the cathedral was dying down, less and less screams until only a few remained outside with David and them.

The nearest Cainite turned to look at David, and her eyes changed from shock to pure rage. But before she got to use her fury and beat him to death with the butt of her sword, Daoka charged forward, crashing through the few remnants that remained, and head-butted the Cainite in the back. The crack of bone was audible. Worse was the crack of a skull as Daoka jumped high, and drove a hoof down onto the woman's head.

Down to only a few numbers, the Cainites didn't care. And they weren't just lost to their own bloodlust, either. An aura filled the room, one of rage and mindless aggression. It'd started softly at first, but grew as the fight went on.

Acelina. She was burying the cavern in an aura of violence, but not a powerful one. Not enough to break an angel's will, or a demon's, but enough to make the humans blissfully continue their mindless rioting, until they practically threw themselves on the girls' weapons and claws. She'd snuck the aura up on them, so slowly and subtly, David hadn't noticed until now, a lull in the fighting.

It was a lull the Las took advantage of, and they ripped the remaining Cainites apart. They ran on all-fours and went for the calves, slashing Achilles tendons and the throats of falling souls. And the Cainites were so consumed with trying to either reach the angels flying above, get back into the cathedral to get the angel in there, or take a swing at the closest big demon, they were barely aware of the little ladies running around on the ground.

"You... killed the other unmarked?" Moriah asked, sword pointed at David, shield aimed in Caera's general direction as the tiger prowled around in circles underneath her. "There was another?"

"You didn't know?" David lowered his hands and turned to face the archway. "You came here and slaughtered... what, over a hundred souls, just to get me? What the fuck did I do!? Why would you—"

The rapholem — the angels in thicker armor with bigger shields, according to Caera — landed in the center of the cavern, and drove her spear directly into the head of the last Cainite. Not a battle, a slaughter, at least for the angels. All David's girls were beat up, bleeding, panting, groaning, and clutching wounds. Jeskura landed near Dao and David, holding her side, and she half limped, half walked over to her lover.

“You okay?” Jes asked, looking at them both.

Dao clicked a few times, nodding.

“The unmarked was in there,” David said, nodding toward the archway of blackstone. “He was... a fucking sociopath narcissist, far as I can tell. Then that other angel broke in, and started killing all the Cainites, and they tried to kill him and—”

“Shaul!” Moriah flew up to the windows of the cathedral, but her armor and wings were too big. “Shaul, where are—”

A flash of gold filled the cathedral, and a pair of wings sped through the archway tunnel entrance. Something shined within.

A blur of gold, white, silver, and menacing eyes came at David. Blue eyes, glaring, shining, and cutting through the darkness as they came at him a million miles a second.

He froze. Brain stopped computing. A freight train was coming at him, bright lights at the end of the tunnel.

Someone hit him. His feet slid against the stone and stumbled over the surrounding bodies. The world turned upside down as giant white feathers covered the air, and something metal struck past him.

Daoka clicked once. Jeskura screamed.

David turned around in time to see someone with red skin standing where he'd been standing. A man with beautiful armor and a sword stood in front of her. The sword was inside her stomach.

“Death to sinners. Death to demons.”

The angel tried to swing the sword to the side so it'd cut his target nearly in half, but Jeskura jumped him, pushing him back instead. The sword slipped free and forward out of Daoka's stomach, and a wave of blood came with it.

The satyr fell to her knees. Other people ran to her and David. Caera attacked the angel, too, and the angel roared with satisfaction as he pushed them back with his shield.

“Kill them!” the angel Shaul yelled. “The council demands their death!”

The other two angels paused, but only for a moment. They dove into the fray, and only Acelina and the Las charging forward gave them a barrier to stop them from killing Jes and Caera.

David looked at Dao. She looked at him with her eyeless gaze, smiling, only to cough up blood as she rolled onto her side and clutched the hole in her stomach.

This wasn't happening.

"Fuck you! Fuck you!" Jes's voice.

David couldn't see her, his eyes locked on Dao and the liquid leaking between her fingers. He crawled closer to her, over the corpse between them, and got on his knees beside her.

"No no..." Someone's voice came out, quivering and weak. His voice. "No no no."

Put it in a box. Compartmentalize. Intellectualize. Don't feel. Think. How to handle. How to fix this. Daoka had been stabbed. Daoka was dying. Hearts! He needed to give her hearts, multiple, right now.

He lifted his head up. Caera had a new stab wound in the leg, and was limping out of range of the rapholem angel. Shaul was trying to kill Jes, and only her grappling kept him from cutting her in half. Moriah couldn't get close, not with the Las and Acelina all trying to hit her, and she stayed hovering in the air.

One of the Las came for the rapholem's back, trying to help Caera, but the angel spun to face her and raised her spear. Lasca, the first of the Las who'd talked, bravest of her group, was trying to attack a holy warrior of Heaven, someone a hundred times stronger than any imp. She wasn't as fast.

She was going to die.

David's useless little mental box shattered.

He grabbed the strings inside him and plucked them so hard they felt like they'd break, like any musician did when they were livid. He hit them. He hit them as hard as he could.

The strings that flowed through him vibrated. It created something, and it wasn't an aura.

Searing heat poured through his veins, blinded him, wiped away every thought, every stupid worthless fucking thought, and left nothing but heat in its wake. He plucked the strings inside him harder, much harder, hard enough to break, hard enough to shatter mountains.

The sound flowed through him, a deep bass that rumbled, blocked out his thoughts, blocked out everything. He pulled on the strings harder, until the sound became pure vibration that buzzed through him. It was like he'd latched onto a giant whale, and it was singing to him as it guided him through the currents. All he could do was hold on, and play the strings as loud as he could, creating no aura, but something else, a sound that echoed throughout... Hell.

Use me as thou wilt.

He pointed a finger at the rapholem.

A black spike shot up from the ground, right under the angel. It was several inches thick, barbed, and amber veins ran along its sides. It pierced up through the angel's underside, between her legs, through her armor, and up into her torso. She didn't get to yell, not with a giant spike up through their diaphragm. Raising her several feet into the air caused the spear she'd stabbed forward to only graze the top of Lasca's head, and the impa squealed as she fell back on her ass, staring at the carnage before her.

Everyone stopped, and stared.

David stood up, and flicked a single finger at the angel. The barbs on the huge spike inside her that'd ripped her insides into mulch on the way in, shot outward, in all directions, for several feet. Acelina and Lasca both jumped back with a shriek as angel armor exploded outward, and blood followed. And then body parts.

The angel's spear, shield, and broken armor all vanished in a quiet poof of useless gold.

"Tzipporah!" the flying target said.

David looked up at her, and reached for the strings inside him, but a shriek drew his attention. The killer with blue eyes had thrown Jeskura to the ground, and was about to stab her. No, he was about to chop her in half, head to crotch, like chopping wood. He hadn't even bothered to look at his newly dead friend.

He deserved to die, in a worse way than the other angel.

David reached out, aimed his palm at the killer, and drew it upward. Another spike shot up from the ground, but it was bigger, fatter, and covered in more barbs. It ripped through the angel's armor, same as the other one, skewering him on it like a body on a pike. But didn't get deep enough to penetrate the diaphragm. The angel could still breathe. Still scream.

"Aah!" The angel shrieked a death cry. It joined the music flowing through everything.

David aimed his palm at the angel again, and spread his fingers wide, like opening the world. The barbs growing out of the spike didn't explode like in the other angel. That'd be too quick. Too merciful.

The amber veins inside the spike broke, like cracking glass, and the lava within poured into the angel's guts.

The cavern filled with the screaming, gargling sound of the angel, burning from the inside out. David didn't want to watch, but he did. It was the music he created, and it had to be listened to. It had to be seen.

“Shaul! No!”

David looked up at the remaining angel again, and held out his hand.