

BITE
ME



A
Stranger Things
Story

DINA JAMES

Bite Me: A Stranger Things Story

by Dina James

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DEDICATION

This short story is nothing but complete and total fanservice. It's you, the fans, who love Billy Cardoza so much, that got this story written. As such, this story is dedicated to all of you.

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And, as always, to He Who Enables My Crazy (my husband Rob) and my mother.

“Damn it, you flaming furball!”

Billy reached down and swept the black microfiber blanket off the half-grown hellhound’s back. “Stay out of my stuff!”

Noth peered at him over the arm of the couch he was stretched out on, then turned back to the TV he was watching with Rebecca.

She patted his haunch and arched an eyebrow at him. “Don’t ignore Billy like that. He’s talking to you. Were you in his den again?”

“He had the black fuzzy. I wanted it,” Noth said.

“You know very well an anubi’s den is his own place, and you’re not supposed to enter unless you’re invited,” Rebecca said. “And you’re not supposed to take things from other people just because you want them.”

“Well, how else am I supposed to get it?”

“You ask nicely,” said Rebecca.

“And he would have said no. So I didn’t bother asking at all.”

“Clearly,” Rebecca said. She looked up at the huge wolf in human form. “I’d say he’s sorry, but...”

“But he ain’t,” Billy said, curling his lip as an Anubin growl issued from his chest. “So don’t you dare apologize for him, Bit.” He glared at Noth. “I’m warning you, Furball—”

Noth stood, every hair on his black coat raised. Claws on each paw scored the fabric beneath them as they lengthened. “*You warn me?*”

“Whoa. Guys—” Rebecca began.

“Backyard,” Billy growled, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Ain’t gonna tear up Martha’s house teaching you some manners.”

“No!” Rebecca said. She rose and came to stand between the two Ethereals. The gigantic man-wolf towered over both her and the young hellhound standing on the couch. Billy’s chest heaved as his breath deepened in preparation for battle. Even in his human form, she could see his anubi muscles were taut with what was probably every ounce of restraint he possessed. His people weren’t exactly known for their self-control, but pack hierarchy and strict adherence to their society’s rules kept their tremendous physical power under control.

Usually.

Billy was an outcast and followed his own code. Further, he was Clan Cardoza, adopted—despite the ceaseless war between his kind and theirs—by an unorthodox vampire clan headed by Rebecca’s mentor and boyfriend, Sydney. The man-wolf (not wolf-man) was her bodyguard, packmate, and for all intents and purposes, big brother, and he would never harm her. If anyone could stop him from tearing something to pieces, it would be her, and she had absolutely zero doubt in her mind that Billy would make instant kitty litter of

the juvenile hellhound despite Noth's tenacity. Billy had an extra-special dislike for hellhounds, and she knew the only reason he tolerated Noth was because of her. Well, and because Noth had saved both her and Billy's lives, all in the same night.

"Guys. Stop it," she said, putting as much command as she could into her words without bringing the power of her Healer's ability into it. She could invoke clemency if she had to, but it would hurt both of them if she did right there in her own house, already within the protections of the boundary.

"Kid needs to be taught a serious lesson—" Billy said.

"I ain't your kid!" Noth interrupted. "And you ain't gonna teach me nothin'!" He leapt off the couch and bolted upstairs.

Billy's eyebrows shot up. He took half a step back and stared down at Rebecca.

Her mouth fell open and she, too, stared after the hellhound. She recovered from her shock first. "Is it just me, or did he sound *exactly* like you?"

"The hell was that about?"

She shrugged. "He hasn't really had any experience with this realm like you have. He'd never say it, but he looks up to you, big guy. Apparently he also pays attention to how you speak. I'm surprised that didn't come out in your sexy Southern drawl."

His human form turned pink as he blushed. "Ain't my fault I done most of my growin' up in this realm in Mississippi. That's where the portal I used dropped me off some...what year is this? Somethin' like ninety years ago now. I forget."

She smiled, shook her head, and wrapped her arms around his middle. She squeezed him hard. "You look good for an old man."

"Ain't but a kid where I come from, you know that! Speakin' of kids...I'd better go and find your'n since he run off 'cause of me."

"He's not my *kid*! He's my friend!"

"Well, Bit, he sure as hell ain't mine! Said so himself!"

#

"Kid? Hey, Kid...where you at?" Billy peeked around the door of the Healer's Enclave. "Know you went this way. Can't hide much from an anubi, you know. 'Sides...you reek. I mean...you know...like all your kind smell. Smoke and flames and brimstone stuff... Kid?"

The Enclave was empty, save for a toddler-sized faun recuperating in what served as an Ethereal traction frame made of moonstone and a special type of leather crafted by goblins. Goblins had a knack for mischief, and tying things into impossible knots was a specialty of theirs. Goblin leather made the best kind of lashing for binding most Ethereal creatures who took it as a

challenge to escape from things, which made it excellent for setting the bones of the more adventurous beings.

“How you doin’, goat-boy?” Billy asked the faun.

“The sooner I am able to leave this madhouse, the better,” the faun grunted, crossing his arms over his diminutive chest.

“Hey, this is what you get for dancing about on the Golden Gate Bridge,” said Billy, inhaling deeply. “Cars ain’t nothing to tangle with. Bet that was something to see, though...you bouncing on the asphalt between big rigs and Volkswagons. Come on out, Kid...know you’re here somewhere...”

“I told you, I didn’t know in which time I’d awakened. Such a marvelous structure...it begged to be crossed,” said the faun.

“Yeah, well, next time, resist. You seen a hellhound run through here?”

The faun yawned and pointed to the portal cover made out of two old car doors welded one atop the other. “Went tearing through there without even a ‘by-your-leave-sir.’ Of course, I wouldn’t expect his kind to show politeness, so there you are. Jupiter, whatever the Healer gives me for the pain serves to weary me.” He closed his black eyes and sank into his pillow, fast asleep.

Kid must’ve woken him up “tearing through,” Billy thought as he approached the portal-cover. He opened it, stuck his head through, and took a deep sniff. Tracking through portals was damn near impossible—it was partly how he’d managed to elude his vengeful brother for decades—but it could be done if one knew how. Billy caught the faintest whiff of brimstone and cat hair from the living room couch Noth loved lounging on and followed it into the portal. His brow furrowed.

The scent led to the Hell Realm.

The hell was the kid doing going home? If he was caught there, they’d kill the little defector. Noth had forsaken his pack for his own life, and hellhounds didn’t take too kindly to...well, anything, really... Was life in the human realm so bad the brat would rather die than live here with Bit and her grand-dam, Martha?

With *him* and Bit and Martha.

He growled. When had he started considering the little monster part of his adopted pack? Billy sighed and shifted into his hulking natural wolf-on-two-legs form. No sense in wasting valuable seconds changing forms when he was about to walk, quite literally, into Hell.

#

The second Billy exited the portal into the Hell Realm, he dropped to the filthy surface beneath his feet and rolled. Everything in this realm smelled like rotten eggs and smoke. Hopefully the black soot-dirt would cover up some of his scent. Hellhounds had an excellent sense of smell, but nothing like an anubi.

He lifted his nose and took another deep sniff. The right side of his mouth twitched in a smile; the paralyzed left side stayed put. He crouched low and moved in the silent manner of his people after the unique scent of housecat. If the kid weren't dead by the time he got to him, Billy would have to talk to him about standing out like a cat among a pack of wolves for real.

Hushed whispers caught his pricked ears. One of them was definitely Noth. He was still just a kid, and his voice had a higher timbre than his full-grown ilk. Another whisper was definitely female, but only an anubi or other creature with excellent hearing could even begin to tell the difference between genders when it came to hellhounds. Billy crept to a rough pillar and peered into the small crevice that served as the opening to a larger cavern. Inside were Noth and two females. Billy's lips thinned as he realized the feat of dexterity the kid would have had to perform in order to wedge his ass in through that tiny crack. Billy would have given twenty cheeseburgers to have seen that. Fries, too.

"We got away as soon as we saw your signal, but we can't keep doing this, Noth. You know how Mother gets," said one of the females.

"I know," said Noth. "I shouldn't even be here, but..."

Billy craned his neck as far as he dared and bent his head lower to give his ears the best angle he could to hear from this far away. But what? And they "can't keep doing this?" How long had the kid been running back to his own realm?

"I don't see how you live with those creatures," said the other female. Billy could all but see her lip curling in disgust, the way she spoke. "And how come you won't tell us why you left? Jaia and I are both collared now, and our Choosing Ceremony is in a few days. I hope Protharen chooses me as his Guardian. He's so dreamy."

"Oh, shut up, Kaia. You know Protharen has his eye on a *male* Guardian. He'd choose Porl before he'd choose you," said the first female.

Kaia and Jaia, Billy thought. Bit said Noth had sisters. They must be them.

Noth laughed. "How is Porl? I miss him."

"You should have thought of that before you left!" Kaia snapped.

Jaia shoved her shoulder hard against Kaia. "If you don't shut up, I'm not going to tell you when Noth visits again!"

"I'll see the signal he leaves and come anyway," Kaia said, flicking an ear at her sister.

Jaia glared at Kaia, then turned back to Noth, smiling. "Porl is fine," she said. "He keeps asking where you are. I don't think he understands yet that you've...gone."

"We should tell him you're dead," Kaia said. "That way he'll stop asking."

"Don't do that!" Noth barked, his voice filling the small space with an echo. All three hounds cringed, their ears flat against their heads. Billy did the

same until Noth spoke again, his voice a whisper once more. “It will just upset him. Has he been collared, too?”

“Yes, somehow,” Kaia said, rolling her crimson eyes. “He’s doing well despite his...abnormality. Father works him hard. He’s not you, though.”

“I wish you’d tell us why you left,” Jaia said, brushing her shoulder up against Noth’s much more gently than she’d done to her sister. “Was it us?”

“No, Jaia, it wasn’t you,” said Noth. “I just—”

Approaching footsteps mixed with the creak of armor muffled Noth’s words. Billy tried to crouch low and make himself as unobtrusive as he could behind the pillar, but strong demonic hands gripped his upper arms tight, two on each side. He was hauled to his feet and made to walk a few steps into the light of a lava pool.

A familiar demonic face leered down at him. “Well, well...what do have we here?”

“Besides a bad attitude, a funky smell, and a passel of big ugly scars down your arms, I’d say you ain’t got much, Armaros,” said Billy. He gave his shoulders a hard shake. The tight grip of the demons remained in place. “How’s about you call off your boys before I take this personal?”

“Oh, they won’t harm you,” said Armaros. “The bargain I made with your beloved Healer absolves you of any harm at mine or any other demon’s hands, but ‘harm’ has a narrow definition. Imprisonment, for example, isn’t harmful as long as the prisoner is taken proper care of. I could very well keep you permanently restrained here and not harm you at all.”

“Not forever, because I’d die in this realm if I’m here too long, and I’m pretty sure dying counts as harm,” Billy said, meeting the demon’s radioactive-green eyes without fear.

“Oh, we’d take you into another realm as necessary to keep you alive. As I said...‘harm’ has such a specific limitation there are many ways around it. But I’m not as interested in what to do with you as I am in the reason you’re here at all. From what I understand, this is the last realm in which one would expect to find you, what with your unfortunate past and all. Perhaps you’ve come seeking vengeance against the Hellguard Chief who so maimed you, lo those many years ago.”

Billy snorted. “Yeah. Sure. That’s it. Why don’t you call him and we’ll settle the score right here and now?”

“Alas, he is not mine to call as he is not my Guardian,” said Armaros. “Yet if vengeance were truly your intention, you wouldn’t be skulking about in the dark near the soul crevices listening...what were you listening for, Anubi? Or perhaps to?”

“Classic rock. You guys get great reception down here.”

Armaros laughed softly. “Your kind has beyond exceptional hearing, yet you were so intent on whatever it was you were listening to that you didn’t hear

our approach until our patrol was all but upon you. I may be limited in my methods by my bargain, but I am not stupid. I will find out what it was, one way or another. It would be considerably less distressing for those awaiting your return to the Mortal Realm if you would be forthcoming about this.”

Billy turned his head and spat on the ground at Armaros’ feet.

The ground beneath him vibrated as a deep voice filled the cavern. “He came after me.”

#

Billy’s head whipped around to see Noth standing as tall as he could, his chin lifted in defiance as he stared at Armaros.

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Noth continued. He lowered his head and stretched his front paws in a mocking half-bow to the large gray-green being.

“An anubi and an anathema,” said Armaros, smiling. “This is a fortuitous day.” Armaros nodded to another two demons, then tilted his head in Noth’s direction.

“Kid, what are you doing? Run!” Billy said, struggling against his captors. He growled. “You boys are really starting to annoy me.”

“Annoyance isn’t harmful,” Armaros said. “And he cannot run. Exile or no, he must submit to his Masters as long as he is in this realm.”

“The hell you come back here for if you knew that, Furball?”

“None of your business, either!” Noth said quickly, before two demons looped a chain around his neck and tightened it with a sharp jerk. He yelped, but followed behind the demon without resisting.

Billy heaved his shoulders as hard as he could and flipped the demons holding him onto their backs. He let out a fierce howl and knocked Armaros flat before four other demons piled on top of him.

“Anubi!” Noth called over his shoulder as the demons led him down a dark tunnel. “This is not your fight. Return to the Mistress!”

The demons wrestled Billy upright and brought him before Armaros once more.

“You let that kid go!” Billy spat, trying to shake off the demons holding him. “He ain’t done nothin’!”

Armaros smiled. “Oh, but he has. He has given me exactly what I need to honor my bargain yet still torment you. You will go back to your own realm, and will be forbidden from this one. You will tell the Mistress Healer that my bargain to not harm members of Clan Cardoza was honored. You will also tell her that the Guardian she corrupted has been reclaimed and will be disposed of like the treasonous cur he is.” The demon made a circular gesture and Billy was turned around.

Movement drew his attention and, in the shadow of another pillar near the soul-crevice, he could see the crimson eyes of Jaia and Kaia. Though muffled, his sharp hearing caught the unmistakable sound of crying, and he knew it was Jaia. If there was anything that Billy couldn't stand, it was a female crying.

"Not today, boys," he growled. He dropped to a crouch, taking his captors with him. As the demons lost their footing, their grip on his arms loosened a fraction and he jerked sharply out of their hold. He spun back and pounced on the four demons with a vicious snarl. Arms, legs, torsos, and heads went flying in every possible direction as he tore them apart. Before the last body part hit the ground, he clamped a massive hand around Armaros' throat. "You're coming with me, Pretty Boy."

He half-carried, half-dragged the struggling demon toward the tunnel the others had led Noth down. Ten steps from the entrance, a vicious growl halted him. Fifteen demons, each with a crimson-eyed hellhound held by a spiked chain, lined the chamber. Front and center stood the tallest demon Billy had ever seen, and on the end of the chain he held was Lord Notharion, Chief of the Hellguards...Noth's father.

The right side of Billy's mouth widened as he grinned and tightened his grip on Armaros' throat. Billy slung his arm around the demon's neck, locking Armaros in a chokehold. "Lookit all them smelly-ass losers," he said in Armaros' ear, though loud enough for the demons to hear. "Think they'll like being taken apart, too? I know you guys will put yourselves back together toot-sweet here in your own realm, but it sure is fun ripping you to bits. Kinda rubbery, like Play-Doh, and I'm in the mood for entertainment."

Armaros laughed as much as Billy's hold allowed. "The bargain I made does not extend to our Guardians."

"We meet again, anubi," Lord Notharion said, the floor vibrating with his words.

Armaros nodded and each demon released their hound.

"Son of a—" Billy swept his arm up and tossed Armaros at the hellhounds, knocking three of them off their feet as he bolted in the opposite direction. His only chance was to make the portal before they caught him.

"This way!" he heard in a low growl near the soul crevice Noth and his sisters had been meeting in.

He knew that voice. That was Kaia, Noth's rude sister. The hell he'd trust her for? She was a hellhound for one, considered him a "creature" for another, and was Notharion's whelp to boot. Before he could think further, he was hit from the side by an invisible lump. He hit the ground hard, skidding along his left side. For a split second, he could see an obsidian rock face speeding toward him, and he tucked his head in the crook of his arm to shield his face from the inevitable blow.

It didn't come. He slid to a stop and immediately leapt to all-fours, ready to make whatever he was about to face next bleed.

There wasn't anything. Or anyone, for that matter. He took a deep sniff and sneezed. The sound echoed around the cavern.

"Shut up! They'll hear you! Do you want to get killed?"

"The hell—"

"I said shut up! Are your kind deaf as well as stupid?"

"Hey—"

"SHH!"

Billy did as he was told and listened hard. He could hear muffled footsteps and faint growls of a hellhound pack, and after a few long moments they faded away. He looked around the obsidian cavern, barely able to make out anything in the almost complete darkness.

"Why did you come here?" the voice said.

"I ain't sayin' nothin' to someone hidin' in the shadows," Billy said, cocking his head in an attempt to determine the direction of the echo's source.

"You're not really in a position to make demands, anubi."

"Oh, come off it...Kaia, was it? You're Noth's sister, ain't you?"

"And you would be?"

"The one your dad did a number on long before you were born. Name's Billy, so you can stop calling me 'anubi' like something you horked up after a bad meal."

The voice didn't reply for a long moment, but he could hear movement and hushed whispers coming from somewhere to his left. He slowly crept in their direction and found the two young female hellhounds in a sheltered recess that hid them from the rest of the cavern. "You know, if you're going to talk about somebody behind their back, best do it when they're not in the same room," he said, his lop-sided grin blunting his chastisement. "Or at least make sure they ain't got great hearing like I do. Hey, ladies. How you doin'?" He made a point of looking around the darkness. "Nice place you got here. This your hideout?"

"Our old den," Jaia said.

Her sister shouldered her hard. "Shut up, Jaia!"

"So, you two gonna try and kill me yourselves, then take my head back to your dad and show him you done good?" Billy stood on two legs and crossed his arms over his chest. "Because I gotta say, that ain't gonna go very well for you." He looked down at Kaia. "I might be dumb, but I ain't stupid, and I got no problem killing somethin' that's tryin' to kill me, lady or no."

"If we wanted to kill you, we'd have done it by now," Kaia said with a snort. "Like I said, we want to know why you're here. Why'd you...come after our brother?"

"What's it to you? Not like you care about him."

“That’s not true—!”

“Shut up, Jaia!”

“No!” Jaia brushed past her sister and stared up at Billy. Unlike Noth, who had spent considerable time in the Mortal Realm and only came up to his thigh, she came up to his waist. “We care about him very much. We miss him. He won’t tell us why he left...and Mother cries at night when she thinks we’re asleep. She cares, and so does Porl. So does Father, even though...”

“Even though he was the one that run him off, right?” Billy said. He unclenched and sat down, letting Jaia loom over him. She considered him for a moment, then sat as well. Kaia came and sat by her sister. “Look, I can’t tell you anything, either. Noth don’t talk much, and when he does, he don’t talk about here. Far as I know, he ain’t never told no one nothin’ about why he left, and anyway, I’m the last one he’d tell.”

“Why is that?” Jaia asked.

Billy shrugged. “Me and the kid...we don’t get along real well. Don’t rightly know why that is. Think it’s got something to do with your dad. I’m sure that’s why he saved my life.”

“He saved your life?” Kaia asked, her crimson eyes widening.

“Yeah, he did. Bit’s too. Er...the Mistress Healer. So, there’s your answer about why I’m here. My people take loyalty seriously, and Noth and I got somethin’ in common.”

“What?” Jaia asked.

“We both got ourselves exiled, that’s what. Now, if I’m going to save that brat’s life, I gotta get to him. You two gals couldn’t point a fella in the right direction, could you?”

Kaia and Jaia looked at one another, then Kaia nodded. “Think you can be quiet, you big, clumsy—”

“Kaia—” Jaia said through a sigh.

“Anubi?”

“You won’t even know I’m here,” Billy said. “Lead the way.”

#

The ground burned very warm under Billy’s belly as he lay on an outcropping of lava rock above a molten pool. Kaia and Jaia did the same on either side of him.

“Here is where we leave you, Anubi,” Kaia said. “We can’t be seen helping you or we’ll die as traitors, too. You remember the way we showed you to the portal?”

Billy nodded. “Thanks for the help, ladies. Couldn’t have done this without you.”

“We know,” Jaia said, flashing a shark’s-mouth grin at him. “Our pack

would have had you in another second or so.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you ran into me then, isn’t it?” he replied with a wink.

Jaia’s tail wagged slightly. Kaia rolled her eyes and thumped Billy’s shoulder with her nose. “Get him and get out. You absolutely reek. How Noth stands you, I don’t know.”

“Love you too, sis,” Billy muttered, shouldering her as much as he dared.

The two hellhounds snorted in unison and faded to translucence. Billy felt the pressure of them on either side move away and knew he was alone. He peered down at the lava pool again, waiting. The girls said their brother would be brought here and run through a gauntlet of his pack before being forced into the pool. Billy knew what a gauntlet was...intimately. He made his way down to the pool, keeping a careful eye on the entrance as he crouched low between two boulders.

Inaction began to tighten his shoulders, the tight spaces around him not ideal for a being his bulk.

Gotta ease up on the cheeseburgers, he thought as he braced his feet against a huge piece of pumice. *Either that or spend more time down here wrasslin’.*

He boosted himself up an inch to peer over the boulder that shielded him from the dark hole both hellhounds and demons began to pour through.

“There’s enough for a gauntlet,” one of the demons said to another. “The others can keep looking for the anubi. We’ve got to deal with this now. The longer the whelp is here and alive, the greater the chance his taint spreads to the others.”

The other demon nodded and went to the edge of the lava pool. His hellhound immediately sat beside his master’s boots when the demon stopped.

Billy raised his eyebrows. He’d never been much for hellhounds—quite the opposite in fact—but what he’d seen today spoke of absolute military precision when it came to their obedience. It seemed they were as dutiful as they were vicious. No wonder Noth had a hard time here. Billy couldn’t imagine the kid blindly following orders like the ones that formed two lines of six each, facing one another. Each demon held what looked like a crossbow loaded with a jagged arrow. He forced himself not to growl. This wasn’t a gauntlet.

This was a kill squad.

With a gauntlet you had a chance at surviving if you made it to the end, slim though it may be. If you made it to the end, you were left to your fate. This one was going to make sure Noth didn’t survive. If he did make it to the end alive, there was a fiery death waiting for him. It wasn’t enough to put the kid down...they were going to make sure he suffered first. For the first time in his life, Billy felt sorry for a hellhound. If this is what they did to any one of them that showed a spark of independence or rebellion...no wonder Noth left.

Not just left. Noth had asked for sanctuary. Now Billy understood what that meant. As long as Noth had Bit's blessing, he would be safe in her company or anywhere behind a boundary. He hadn't run away from home. He'd run away from this.

Finally Noth was led into the chamber. Billy smiled to himself. He'd never given much thought to hellhounds and their differences—one looked like another to him—but now he'd lived with the kid awhile, he could see that Noth was gangly compared to the adults waiting to tear him to pieces. Noth's black-as-midnight coat wasn't as full or as flame-laden as theirs, either, and his ears and crimson eyes were larger. He did have the deep chest and huge paws the others did, but his serrated teeth weren't as long or fierce-looking. The difference in size was painfully obvious the closer he came to the gauntlet.

The kid wasn't even fighting them. He just followed, meek as a kitten, though the demon gripping the chain held it as though Noth were an enraged bull. Billy clenched his jaw as tight as he could to keep from making any sound. He shifted his weight and pressed himself up from the boulder a fraction of an inch. Now he could see both the entrance, and his exit. Noth was steps away from the first set of hounds forming the gauntlet. Billy crouched as low as he could while still being able to see. If he was going to make this, he had one shot at it.

Oh, well. Best die doin' somethin' damn near impossible than somethin' boring.

Noth was another step closer. Billy hunched his shoulders.

Another step.

Wait for it, boy...

Golden drool began forming at the sides of the first hellhound's mouth.

The blank resignation on Noth's face as he put his paw into the gauntlet was the last thing Billy saw before he launched himself over the boulder and under Noth's belly. He wrapped one arm around Noth's haunches and leapt as high as he could against the opposite wall of rock. He laughed as demons began shouting and hellhounds began to roar.

"Oof. Seems we both gotta lay off the cheeseburgers, Kid."

"Anubi! What—"

Billy yelped as pain arced across his back. He looked under his arm to see the tip of a demonic arrow protruding through his chest. His feet scabbled for purchase against the sheer rock. He dug his claws in as much as he could and hauled both himself and Noth up on the narrow ledge they could follow to the path Kaia and Jaia had shown him. Another arrow pierced his flesh, eliciting another howl. He stumbled and fell hard.

He reached down and gave it a firm tug. The shaft snapped, leaving the point still embedded in his thigh. "Aw, damn. Pretty sure this counts as harm."

"No, it doesn't," Noth said, peering at the wound. "They're arrows, not hands. The bargain says—"

“Yeah, yeah, whatever!” Billy pointed into the dark ahead of them. “Go! Get to Bit! She needs someone lookin’ after her!”

“Why’d you—”

“Ain’t got time to jaw about it! We’re square now! Get goin’!” He looked over his shoulder and saw demons beginning to climb the wall after them. “Kid! Go!”

“I ain’t leavin’ you here! Come on!” Noth crouched low and shoved his muzzle and neck under Billy’s arm. “Get up, doofus!”

Billy couldn’t help but smile as he struggled to his feet. “Bit calls me that.”

“This way,” Noth said, urging him to the darkness before them. “Hurry!”

“Movin’ as fast as I can, Kid. Those arrows hurt like nothin’ I’ve ever felt.”

“They’re tipped with hellhound drool. You’ll be dead in a few minutes if we don’t get to the Enclave.”

“A few minutes your way, or a few minutes the human way?”

“Both,” Noth said.

“Then why you wasting time on me? Get yourself out of here.”

“The Mistress would miss you, and should I escape without you, I do not relish telling her I left you behind to die. You know how she is.”

“Good point.” Billy began to gasp for breath.

Noth looked up at him. “Ease. The poison works faster the more you fight it. The portal isn’t far. You can make it. You made it out of the Dark Healer’s Enclave. You can make it out of this.”

“Ain’t nothin’,” Billy said through gritted teeth.

“I can bear your weight.”

“You ain’t but a little bit of nothin’, like Bit, and I weigh a ton. I’d crush you.”

Noth snorted. “Try it.”

“All right, tough guy. May as well die killing a hellhound.” Billy collapsed against Noth. As he had said, he took Billy’s weight, with only the slightest stumble. “Not bad, Kid.”

“It’s only because I’m in this realm,” Noth said. He took a step forward, forcing Billy to move with him. “Were I older, this would be much easier.”

“Told you I weigh a ton,” Billy murmured. He closed his eyes.

Noth shook himself hard. “Stay awake! If you succumb, the Mistress may not be able to bring you round again.”

“S’okay,” said Billy. “Jus’ a bit...sleepy...”

#

Noth strained and grunted as he inched Billy’s form closer to the portal he could see in the distance. Growls and shouts began to echo around them. Noth

looked behind them and saw the red glow of flames illuminating the cavern. He whined and pulled hard. Another glance showed him the flames were brighter. His legs began to tremble under the anubi's weight. Another step closer. The trembling intensified. A third step and Noth's paws slipped from beneath him. Both he and Billy crashed to the ground.

Red light filled the cavern. Noth wriggled, desperately trying to free himself from Billy's weight, but the anubi was completely unconscious if not dead. Noth whimpered and cringed against Billy's chest. It had been a valiant effort, though in vain.

The weight across his back lifted. Noth's eyes widened as they met those of his sister, Kaia. She buried her head in the crook of Billy's arm and threw her weight behind it, lifting the anubi's bulk. "Move! They're coming!"

Noth flipped to his feet and scooted out from under Billy's body to see Jaia on the other side.

Kaia nudged his shoulder and thumped the anubi's back with her front paws. "Come on! Pounce and roll, like when we were pups, remember?"

He nodded and stepped between his sisters.

"Ready?" Kaia said. "Pounce!" All three hellhound siblings shoved Billy's body hard with their front paws, rolling him toward the portal. Noth smiled at the distance they'd managed.

"Again! Pounce!"

The three of them rolled the anubi to the portal entrance, then into it. Kaia shouldered Noth hard on one side while Jaia did the same on the other, then they shifted to invisibility. Noth looked back to see his father, the Chief of the Hellguards, rounding the corner after him. Lord Notharion's eyes narrowed and his ferocious roar rocked the cavern. Noth lifted his chin and let out a howl, not unlike Billy's taunting laugh. Then with a snort, he turned on his tail and leapt into the portal.

Billy's body was cold in the space between realms. Noth uttered the words to open the portal to the Eastern Enclave, and the familiar sight of the inside of two old car doors welded one atop the other appeared before him. A growl echoed behind him, and he turned to see his father's head enter through the Hell Realm. Noth shoved hard at Billy's back, rolling the huge form into the Enclave.

"BILLY!" Rebecca's head appeared in the portal entrance. "My God! Where—"

"Not now!" Noth roared over his shoulder as he turned around. The space shook with the growls of both hellhounds. "Return home, Father!"

"Not without you, my traitorous whelp," Lord Notharion rumbled, and he leapt toward his son.

Noth yelped as he was yanked off his feet by the scruff of his neck and tossed onto the wooden floor of the Eastern Enclave.

“I deny thee entry and forbid thee from crossing my threshold,” Rebecca said, clearly and calmly through the portal. The floor vibrated with Lord Notharion’s negating growl.

“This does not end here, Rebecca Charlotte,” Lord Notharion spat. “Nor does it end this day. I have tolerated your interference in my family affairs long enough.”

She knelt and bowed her head. “My lord—”

“Deference will no longer avail you,” Lord Notharion said.

She looked up at him. “I’ve enough experience with you now to know your vulnerabilities. I suggest you do not threaten me. As you can see, I have powerful friends.”

Lord Notharion laughed. “It seems to me they are rapidly decreasing in number.”

“Tell Armaros I don’t appreciate his exploiting a loophole in our bargain. And tell your mate—”

“Maelia will hear nothing of you!”

Rebecca went on as though he hadn’t spoken. “Tell your mate that her son is safe and well in my care, despite your...fantastic parenting. As for you, get out. I rescind my welcome to you.” She closed the portal door in Lord Notharion’s face and turned on her knee to examine Billy.

#

It was hard to see—everything was so fuzzy—but Billy recognized the bare wood slats of the Enclave’s ceiling. He groaned.

“Sure do get tired of wakin’ up in this room,” he muttered. He turned his head to see Rebecca sitting beside the candle lantern, asleep with a book in her hand.

“Shh, don’t wake her,” said the familiar voice of Sydney, Rebecca’s vampire mentor and Billy’s adopted clan-sire. “And if you weary of awakening in this room, perhaps you should do more to prevent it.”

Billy tried to smile, but pain lanced through his skull, making him wince instead. “Well, I ain’t dead, so that’s somethin’.”

“That makes twice the hellhound whelp has saved your hide,” said Syd.

Billy cracked an eye. “Told him to leave me there.”

“From what I understand, Noth isn’t all that adept at obedience. Something else you have in common.”

“Yeah? What else we got? Besides both really not likin’ his dad?”

“Well, there’s Rebecca. You both love her and would do anything to keep her safe. Even if the hellhound would never admit to sentiment,” said Syd.

Billy did smile at that, though it made his head hurt again.

“What possessed you to enter the Hell Realm after him? And don’t tell me

it was a demon, because we both know anubi are immune to demonic possession,” said Syd.

“He run off ’cause of me,” Billy said. “What was I supposed to do? Just let him get killed? I know he ain’t welcome at home.”

“And you know what that’s like.”

Billy looked at Syd and didn’t reply for a long moment. “Bit says the kid looks up to me. I ain’t no role model, and I ain’t no dad.”

“But you’re a strong leader and this is your pack. I’d say he’s right to look up to you. Rebecca might have his loyalty, but you have his respect.”

Billy snorted. He looked over at Rebecca. “Better put her to bed. She’ll wake up sore, with her neck cricked like that.”

Syd’s metallic blue eyes glittered as they caught the light of the candle beside his beloved. “If she wakes up anywhere other than here, she’ll stake me. She hasn’t left your side since your return.”

“How long was I out this time?”

“In this realm, several hours. It’s nearly dawn here.”

“She needs to go to bed. She’s got school in the mornin’.”

“Nearly dawn, Saturday,” Syd said. “You were gone three Mortal days.”

“I forget about that kind of thing. Didn’t feel like it was so long. She must-a been outta her mind worried.”

Syd patted Billy’s huge paw. “Ryan was here every night, waiting. It was the only way she’d leave the room. We knew if you were able to return, you would.”

“I’ll be sure and thank him when I see him.” Billy took a few deep breaths, thinking. After a moment, he spoke again. “Suppose you’re right. This is my pack, and I don’t know when the brat became part of it. He’s Bit’s friend, not mine, but what’s important to her is important to me. That’s how a pack works. She wants somethin’, I can’t tell her no, and she wants that flaming furball to have a home. Someplace to den. I can understand that. What I don’t understand is why the little monster wants to den with us.”

“That sounds like something you should discuss with him.” Syd rose and patted Billy’s shoulder. “Get some rest. I’ll return at sundown to see how you fare.”

“Tell Aymi I’m okay, and I’ll come hug her as soon as I can.”

“I shall do so.” Syd nodded and disappeared.

Billy closed his eyes again. He inhaled deeply, smiling at the familiar scents around him. He could detect the smell of Martha’s crocheted wool afghan that always draped the back of her chair, made by her own grandmother. There was chicken stew simmering in the slow-cooker downstairs. Cookies had been made earlier in the day, and it was probably Bit who’d made them, because they’d obviously been left a little too long in the oven, but he’d eat them anyway just because. Coffee. Damn he could use a cup of his wolf’s coffee

right about now. And a few of them breakfast sandwiches from that twenty-four hour place by the highway. Twenty-four hour places were his favorite, because it didn't matter what time of day he wanted something, they were there. Humans had strange issues with time—ate certain things at certain times of day and such. Closing up at night. Sometimes a guy just wanted a pizza at dawn. What was wrong with that?

His stomach growled. His eyes snapped to Rebecca, who murmured in her sleep and wriggled around on her chair, trying to get comfortable.

“Don't worry about waking her up,” Noth said, appearing at the foot of Billy's bed. “Martha slipped tincture of valerian into some tea. It was the only way she would sleep.”

Billy sighed. “Don't suppose she's been getting much rest the last few days. What about you? You okay? I saw what that bastard did to you.”

Noth looked over his shoulder at the portal cover. “Yes.”

“Why'd you go back there if you knew they'd kill you if you was caught?”

Noth turned back to Billy and gave him a piercing glare.

“What? I ain't got a right to know seeing as how I saved your flaming butt?”

Noth didn't say anything.

“Look,” Billy said. “You're an exile, by your own choice if I'm hearing right, and you've got to live with that. You know what you done, and you have to face up to that. I know you miss your pack—”

“I wanted to be sure I made the right choice. And I did. Did you see them? On the chains?”

“I did. And I have. Never thought much about it, before you come. Just thought hellhounds were...well...like Mortal dogs. Pets more than anything. Knew your kind could speak, but figured they didn't have much to say.”

“We're taught not to. They want us to be intelligent, but don't want us to think for ourselves, or question them or our place. They want us to be fierce and mighty, but only if we use our fierceness and might to serve them. It's wrong,” said Noth. “And the collar...the collar makes you even more willing to submit to them. It binds your loyalty to the one holding the leash. It's not a mark of obedience, like we're taught. It's a mark of servitude. We're taught that being Collared is something to strive toward...a privilege to earn. That only the best achieve it. But that's not true. There's no merit in being Collared. If that were true, Porl wouldn't have earned one. He's...”

“I get the idea. He's different, and so are you. Him they won't kill on sight, though.”

“No,” said Noth. “He might not be the most intelligent, but he obeys, and that's all they truly want. Father says this is our nature. Our function and purpose. What we were born to be, and I shouldn't fight it. I should just be what it is I was bred to be. I say no.”

Billy grinned. "Good for you, Kid."

"You said no too, didn't you?"

"Yeah. I guess I did. But I did it for someone else."

"No, you didn't. You did it for you. You could have stayed and accepted things as they were meant to be, and you didn't."

"I couldn't. It woulda killed me to do it."

Noth nodded. "Me too."

Billy patted the bedclothes beside him. "Come on. You can rest here if you want."

The hellhound hesitated, glancing at the portal for a moment before he looked at the deeply sleeping Rebecca. "You won't tell anyone?"

"Not a soul. Besides, you could just turn invisible like your sisters did and no one would even know you're there."

"Only girls can do that." Noth leapt on the bed and curled up next to Billy.

"Only girls, huh? Learn somethin' new every day." The anubi put his arm around the hellhound. Noth rested his muzzle on Billy's chest and closed his eyes. Billy reached for the black microfiber blanket draped over him and pulled it over Noth's back.

Silence reigned for all of two minutes.

"I'm hungry."

"Me too. Think we can sneak out of here and get us some cheeseburgers without waking anyone up?"

Noth opened his eyes and grinned.