

Finding is Losing Something Else

It's been exactly twenty-four hours since the witch, Agatha, went missing. Sebastian's ears have yet to hear her voice, beckoning her little raven to greet her at the entrance. Likewise, Stefan silently stalked the well-lighted room, stifling his concern. His black coat was spotted with colored light from the stained glass window and upon noticing, the cat sauntered back into the shadows to avoid the color clash.

"It's only light," said Sebastian, anxiously flying back and forth between two tables. He was using his inside voice, or in other terms, he spoke the tongue native to Hell. "The worst that it could do to you was to give you a burn. Remember when Agatha went to the beach and came back with peeling skin?"

"Oh stop talking about Agatha," snapped Stefan, green eyes glowing with annoyance. Though, there was a note of suppressed denial in his tone. "She's going to come back. She always comes back. She must've gotten lost again."

"For a whole day? She may be bad at directions, but we've been living here since '06. Maybe an empty stomach is interfering with thinking. Why don't you go outside and hunt some mice?"

"What do you take me for? An actual cat? I refuse to lower myself to such *mortal* standards."

"Well, for the time being, you are, and neither you nor I have the right appendages to open up a cabinet to satisfy that empty head of yours. If you didn't want to become one, then maybe you shouldn't have accepted the contract and continued your frolicking in Hell."

"Shut your beak."

"Is that the best you have? Well, I won't shut it until you admit that Agatha is missing and probably won't be coming back if we can't help it."

"Fine!" Stefan said jumping back into the light. "We'll go to the herbalist and see if she's there or, at least, if anybody knows where she is. We'll figure out the rest later."

"Wonderful." Sebastian ruffled his feathers. He flew towards a window and with his beak, tapped a distinct beat on the glass, causing a glowing circle to briefly appear and for the window to open. "Come along now."

Stefan grudgingly hopped onto a chair, then to the table, and then to the windowsill, carefully avoiding the myriad of glass bottles that decorated the table. Most of them were simply oils extracted from the small garden in the back, to be packaged and sold to customers but some were concoctions made with unconventional ingredients. Agatha had the intention to sort the innocuous from the dangerous for quite some time now, but kept forgetting. Once she comes back, they'd remind her again.

He squeezed through the open window, out into the city atmosphere, where a barrage of smells assaulted his nose.

"Why couldn't Agatha choose a more... pleasant place to set up shop?" said Sebastian, voicing the other familiar's concern. "Being around so many humans makes me feel filthy."

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“At least we can agree on something,” replied Stefan, as he hopped down to the sidewalk. “I proposed the French countryside but I don’t think there is a market there. Also, remember to speak in the animal language. We don’t need the prying eyes of humans at the moment.”

“You’re probably right.”

Sebastian knew that Stefan was *right*, but he would never openly admit it. All of his statements pertaining to the correctness of Stefan’s observations contained a hint of doubt, even if there wasn’t any doubt in the first place.

They made their way towards Eighth Street, avoiding the feet of frantic pedestrians rushing to their morning commute. The sun bore upon their skin like the mythical Atlas bearing the world, singeing their skin with its heat. Stefan grimaced with each step; his paws did not deserve to be tainted by the dirt and grime of city pavements.

“What do you think the angels are doing in Heaven?” asked Sebastian. He turned his head towards the sky, trying to snatch drifting fragments of a past life.

“Flying and running errands, most likely. Bringing messages from people that will go unread,” Stefan said. He stopped and turned his head towards his companion. “You should fly as well. Birds and cats don’t usually walk together, do they? The humans are giving us weird glances.”

Sebastian silently obligated, and with some effort, flapped his wings and soared above, always sure that Stefan was right below him. Having a bird for a body was one of the few things he cherished; he missed soaring overhead, watching as the world rushed past him in a world of colors. Demons merely popped into existence, and where was the fun in that? These wings were an unintentional gift from Agatha, a sort of consolation for choosing the wrong side in the War in Heaven countless eons ago.

That stupid bird, Stefan thought as he followed the shadow. He turned right, remembering the route that Agatha often took. Only a few blocks away now. He passed a group of stray cats lounging in the sun and couldn’t help but smirk. *Look at them, wasting their earthly lives*. And then there was a pause in his thoughts. He was one to judge.

They arrived at Eighth Street and stopped in front of the glass display case. No need to go inside, all the clues were gith here; the proprietor wasn’t magic folk anyway and all they would hear was nonsensical cawing and meowing and he or she would shoo them away with a broom.

Something foul stained the air, that characteristic, burning, suffocating stench as if a fire held you by the throat. It was the smell of decay and decadence. It was the smell of sulfur.

The two familiars exchanged glances. They concluded that this was no ordinary disappearance, it was a kidnapping done by their own kind. They knew the What, the Where, and the How. Now they needed the Who and the Why and to find the Why, they needed the Who.

Sebastian and Stefan raced back home, causing a woman to drop her phone and a child to screech in terror. Though more tame than other demonic creatures, a thrill of delight rushed through their veins at the pandemonium they caused. If a common thread ran between demons, it was that they all shared some propensity to break the rules.

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They entered the house the same way they emerged from and settled in their usual spots: Sebastian in his golden cage and Stefan in a cardboard box that was ever-so-slightly too big for him and commenced their broad search, starting with all demons starting with the letter “A.”

“Agares?” suggested the raven.

“I don’t think so,” replied the cat. “The old duke has been residing in Florida. Word has it that he harrasses people on the beach in dead tongues and keeps a crocodile as a pet. What about Ala?”

“Causing havoc in Australia. Conjuring dust storms and what not.” Sebastian ruffled his feathers. “Don’t you think this is a rather inefficient way to figure out who did it?”

Stefan’s mouth stopped midway in forming a word. “...Let’s try and see if there’s a record of previous demonic encounters, or perhaps even familiars. Agatha is old for a human, surely she must have had some before us.”

“And you think one of them might bode ill will towards her?”

“Many things could happen between the summoning and dismissal.”

The two of them turned their attention towards the rest of the room, a motley mess of old clothes, ancient never-returned spell books, cracked mirrors, and glass jars. Despite the perpetual entropic state of the room, Agatha was quite meticulous when it came to record keeping. She recorded the day’s financial spendings and events in a little blue book she always carried around with her, and even entered Sebastian and Stefan’s daily activities in another book, this time in bright pink. Both of them managed to steal a glance of that book and what they gleaned from it was that Agatha used the word “quarrelsome” a great deal of times.

The mess before them was quite ordered, in Agatha’s eyes. She considered the bedlam of the house a stroke of genius - and somewhere in there, laid that record with every entry to any familiar she had.

Being a familiar of a witch had its advantages and disadvantages, depending on your personal values. But for most, these were the standard outlooks. The disadvantages included: losing some of your free will, being at the mercy of the witch/wizard, losing some of your Devil-given powers, and encountering mortals on a daily basis causing you to wonder why God created them in the first place. The advantages include: having more variety in entertainment other than torturing the damned and breeding sin within virtuous minds.

Most of the time, Sebastian and Stefan didn’t have to use their powers because a situation hasn’t arose for any use. With a wave of their hands, they could have the book in front of them but instead, they were going to have to sift through the miscellaneous items.

“Since she used the journal a lot, I’d suppose it’d be on top of something,” Stefan said, jumping on a covered chair with books. He looked down to see the title. *Stormy Hearts*. Nope. Not pink with a plain cover - just Lust proving its omnipotent presence. Stefan tried to jump onto the table but his paws slipped and he ungracefully landed on his feet. From above, he could hear Sebastian laugh, a hackneyed sound.

“Oh shut up.”

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“I think I can handle the tall stuff,” said Sebastian, perched on a branch of a houseplant. “You can deal with the floor.”

The raven flew from pile to pile, even dislodging some books. He remembered Agatha writing something down in it yesterday, and she didn’t bring it with her when she went to the herbalist either. Sebastian moved from the living room to the kitchen and landed on the sink faucet. His eyes scanned for the signature pink cover among the various pots and pans that littered the area. They were clean, of course. Agatha always cleaned lost things, but she always kept them for an unfathomable reason; in her eyes, there was something tragic in discarding.

“Any luck over there?” asked Sebastian. “The kitchen seems clean, and it’s less cluttered than the living room.”

Stefan’s blackhead popped up from an open pages of *Stormy Hearts*, mind breaking away from a particularly steamy part of the novel. “Nope.”

“You aren’t even *trying*.” Sebastian flew over to where the cat was sitting, but he didn’t take in account the small chandelier hanging overhead.

Black feathers collided a tangle of plastic diamonds and in a second, Sebastian found himself on the floor. Stefan grinned at him from above and sniped a snide comment: “Who’s grounded now?”

Sebastian merely sent a venomous glare and continued to search, but yet after nearly an hour of sifting through the downstairs rooms, they still could not find it.

“Do you think it’s worth it if we find Agatha,” mused Stefan. He coiled into a ball in the sun, by the window in the kitchen. His thoughts were not entirely rooted in reality. Rather, they drifted in Purgatory. “Our contract is terminated if she dies, right?”

“Banish those hellish thoughts from your mind,” snapped Sebastian. “Of course it’s worth it. Would you rather spend your days mindlessly torturing souls? At least we have some variety here.”

“We are creatures of Hell. It is to be expected that we have hellish thoughts.”

“You forget that we used to be messengers of God -”

“- who willingly decided to follow Lucifer in his descent towards Hell because we didn’t want to become *servants*. We wanted to become *harbingers*. And looks where we are now? Still servants.”

Sebastian gave him a hard, measured look. “We are not free from puppet strings from neither world. Whichever side we choose, there will still be some greater power controlling us. The mortal world is a grey, moral ground where we are not chained to a dogma. We have more freedom here than anywhere else that exists in the universe - a freedom that Agatha gave to us for a minimum charge. ”

Stefan stayed in contemplative silence. He was never one for following the rules, on either side in fact. When he was an angel, he didn’t *fall* - he cannonballed straight into the inferno and immediately drowned in the sea of flames. On Earth, he walked the fine line between Heaven and Hell, where its inhabitants were neither good nor evil; they were dynamic.

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“Let’s find the damned book then,” Stefan merely said, “and hope that a deity takes pity on us.”

Whether it was a deity, or just sheer luck, they found the pink book wedged under a paper plate and over a smudged biography of Harry Houdini. Feverently, they flipped through the pages as best as they could without the proper appendages until they found the final entry of the previous familiar Agatha had employed.

“Foras (Franklin) is dismissed from service after several attempts of escaping, injuring several clients, and attempting to filch my wares. Must find a new familiar soon,” Sebastian quickly read.

How Agatha managed to summon a President of Hell, quite possibly the most pretentious and most scholarly mind in Hell, and kept him chained in a fleshy body for, according to the record, a year-and-a-half, was beyond them. The last time either heard of him was a teaching job in a seemingly abandoned building in Los Angeles, located on the other side of the country. In these bodies, it would take them weeks to get there and by that time, Agatha would surely be dead. The only break they had was that Foras enjoyed examining foreign specimens before utterly consuming their life essence. They had to dispel their current corporeal forms to arrive in time.

Every demon knows how to dispel the enchantment, for emergencies. The only problem was placing the materials in specific spots and at certain angles - and a bird’s wing or a cat’s paw made it more than difficult. It was a balancing act on an uneven surface, another restraint on rebellion. It was only after an hour bottled with frustration and swear words they managed to meticulously place everything in the right place.

Sebastian went first, sitting in the middle of several concentric circles with an intelligible script - the language of Demons. Several chunks of a violet quartz decorated the edges, along with sprigs of rosemary that singed their essences. Small fires (one of which burned a patch of fur off of Stefan) also surrounded the perimeter. They could’ve done it in any language they wanted, people were more literate these days and the magical world expanded cross-countries, but Latin was a holy tongue and they knew a smattering of human languages.

The fires grew and extended out of their bronze basins, engulfing Sebastian in licks of red and orange. Sebastian thought that this what dying felt like: an intense pain originating deep inside until finally it erupted outside and consumed him, leaving nothing but darkness in its wake. He wanted to scream, but bit back his tongue.

Stefan didn’t fear too much for his safety; he was sure that he did the procedure right. After the flames died down, all that remained was smoke, smoke that coagulated into a body filched from 1920s Harlem - a tidy suit and a broad rimmed hat.

“If you mess this up, I’m taking you down all the way to Hell.”

Stefan lept into the center of the circles and listened carefully to Sebastian’s chants. He heard nothing of particular alarm and soon, he too was engulfed in flames as his feline form disintegrated and a humanoid figure emerged from the ashes. This body was older than

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Sebastian's, by a thousand years. A Satanic priest in Saxony in the 1600s sacrificed his body for Hell's Legions and he got assigned him; over the years, Stefan updated his appearance.

The both of them were dressed smartly in black, for that was the dress code of all human bodies. They were demons, not heathens, demons who now had full access of their powers.

Sebastian, with a bright smile on his face, bounded with energy. A raven was a satisfying body to occupy but an actual *body*, now the fun began. "Before we leave..." He pointed his finger at the door and silently traced a pentagram over its surface. When he was done, he applied it to any other possible entrances. "Just in case."

"Good idea. If anyone dares to filch anything in the house," said Stefan, a hint of praise in his tone, "they'll be hexed six ways 'til Sunday. Ready to go to the city of Angels?"

Sebastian nodded and the two teleported to Los Angeles with a pop, leaving behind several knocked over piles of books and fluttering leaflets of paper. For a second, no one was in the room, but then another pop signaled the return of one of the familiars. It was Sebastian, who returned to restore the living room in its proper, chaotic state before joining Stefan.

The world spun around them, and for a few seconds, all they could see were streaks of tan against a blurry monochromatic background. Then, it stopped with a halt, and their bodies thrown into their destination. They found themselves in the midst of a dark alley with trash bags filling the sides and a ladder leading up to the roof.

"There you are," Stefan said, as he smoothed back his greying hair. "What did you need to do back home?"

"Just needed to place everything back. Teleportation tends to rumple up the area a bit, and I would like everything to be perfect when Agatha is saved."

They stepped into the harsh, Californian light. The city of Angels was a bit of a misnomer; the only angels that were here fell from Heaven. Many demons claimed the sprawling city as home for the ironical value while actual angels flitted around acting as law enforcers. There were a few clashes between these parties, but the war will come when someone discovers the Antichrist.

"Do you remember what building Foras resides in?" Sebastian scratched his head, swinging his head around the area.

Hundreds of humans passed by them, all in a hurry to whatever destination they were going to. At the moment, he knew all their destinies - Heaven, Hell, or Purgatory - though, that was subject to change. Both demons knew humans were a stubborn species. Though, whether that was a good or bad qualities has yet to be definitely determined.

"I don't associate with his kind," replied Stefan. He was just a faceless demon in a sea of corruption, holding no rank or title. "I'm sure the Directory has it down somewhere, but we need a good reason."

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Sebastian didn't answer but rather, he was staring at a dove perched on a stop sign, neither willing to break the gaze. The dove didn't look unusual; its white plumage betrayed no sign of abnormality, but its eyes shone with a peculiar eldritch fire. This was no ordinary dove.

"What is your business here, Nathanael?" he asked, oblivious to curious onlookers wondering why a grown man was talking with an animal. He should've expected this, since the city was charged with supernatural energy. If he had, maybe he would've prepared for an encounter with old friends.

The dove merely cocked its head, and then turned its body to the alley the pair emerged from. Stefan grabbed Sebastian's arm, now privy to current events, and grumbling to himself about inconveniences.

Cloaked in darkness, Nathanael spoke in Enochian, the language of angels that sounded like a million silver bells all ringing simultaneously. Both of them haven't heard the language in countless millennia but it still rang clear, like a child hearing his estranged mother's voice after years of separation.

Tension dominated the atmosphere. Lead filled their lungs and iron shackles bound their feet. Memories silently played in their head, broken and jumbled, of a time before the War in Heaven. They remembered each other older and taller, but now they seemed younger and smaller.

"Tell me," Nathanael said, "are you happy now?"

"Why don't you tell us your business in confronting us," responded Stefan with an even tone. Time was of the essence. "We're here on a search and rescue mission. Our witch, Agatha, has been kidnapped by Foras. Do you happen to know where she is?"

Nathanael blinked slowly, somewhat annoyed that they ignored the question and surprised at their intent. "You wish to save the person who imprisoned you in animal bodies and suppressed your powers?"

"Yes," Sebastian replied immediately. He knelt down so as to make eye contact with the angel. "The situation is not black and white, though, I wouldn't expect you to know. Our cause is noble, surely that has to convince you to some capacity."

Nathanael tilted his head up. Los Angeles was already saturated with *their* kind and the relative peace was already strained, but for once, he was confronted with a moral dilemma. Essentially, he was supposed to extradite them to wherever they came from but they would be saving a good person, one who is currently trapped with evil. Just this once, he'll comply with demons.

"Are you going to leave immediately as soon as your mission is completed?" Nathanael said.

"Yes," they answered in tandem, relieved that the penultimate obstacle released them.

"Very well then." Nathanael breathed in deeply. He was sure he made the right choice. After all, allowing an innocent woman to die was a sin. "But if cause any major disturbances to

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the general populace, I will be forced to intervene and I will not be so lenient. Do you understand?”

They nodded vigorously.

“Foras is located on Augusta Avenue. You can’t miss it.”

Nathanael was about to disappear, his job finished, before he saw Stefan approach him. Even after so long, the same eldritch fire burned, characteristic of all angels, fallen or not. It was tainted with Hell’s presence, but was very much identifiable as holy.

“And to answer your question from earlier, about the one whether we were happy,” he started. Stefan looked at Sebastian briefly before returning his attention back to Nathanael. “Happy isn’t the word to describe it, I don’t know how to describe it really. It’s like, seeing light after traveling in a dark tunnel for so long, but the light burns your eyes and yet, you can’t stop tear your gaze from it.”

Nathanael merely stared at them before saying, “That answer suffices. Good luck on your journey, Tzaphkiel.” He turned his attention towards Sebastian. “And you as well, Selaphiel.”

With that, Nathanael flew away, leaving behind the ephemeral sound of wings flapping.

“He’s a good angel,” said Sebastian.

“All angels are good. It’s just in their nature,” replied Stefan. “Now, let’s bring Agatha home.”

Just as Nathanael promised, the abandoned building laid in decadence. Its windows were smashed and left jagged imprints on the faded brick walls. Piles of trash dotted the grey landscape, faded graffiti decorated every flat surface. It looked like any other building, but a certain, imperceptible energy hummed in the air and the unmistakable stench of sulfur.

“How do you want to do this,” asked Stefan, wrinkling his nose. As per regulation, Foras and his legion of educated demons existed in a pocket dimension within the building, so as to keep their existence furtive. “Direct, or indirect?”

“Well,” Sebastian trailed. “If we go directly, there’s a greater chance of our essences being utterly demolished but if Lady Fortune doesn’t crush us under her wheel, then we can save Agatha by merely teleporting to another place and if we go in indirectly, we’ll most likely make it out with our bodies intact.”

“...Directly then?”

“Sure.”

Neither were afraid of “dying,” really. Sebastian wouldn’t mind enduring a hundred years worth of torture because it only composed a fraction of his life. Stefan would rather avoid that situation as much as he could, but was willing to sacrifice a century’s worth of time to bestow Agatha more time.

They sauntered over to the front entrance, rusted with age, and inspected the door to see if there were any wards placed. There were none.

Well, that set off alarms. That meant that Foras and the other demons existed in reality.

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They looked at each other with apprehension, lips pursed and eyebrows furrowed. Was Foras *expecting* their arrival, then? It would make sense. Agatha tended to have a loquacious mouth under pressure, and they would serve as examples for those who dare defy Hell's ranks. Might as well make a grand entrance then.

Sebastian opened the door with a flourish and sprinted into the room, prepared to endure a hoard of other demons. Stefan followed closed behind, about to release a volley of black magic, only for the both of them to halt to a screeching stop.

There was utterly nothing inside, besides the omnipresent scent of sulfur and a few broken bottles and cobwebbed machinery. However, in the dead center of the room, illuminated by a broken skylight, was the witch Agatha, sitting in a wooden chair with her staff beside her. She was the definition of tranquility, with her gnarled hands sitting on her lap and glowing eyes framed by silver rimmed glasses.

"Oh, my darlings," Agatha said, slowly getting up from the chair. Her ancient voice cracked with age, though it remained gentle as ever. "It was about time you came. I was getting quite bored sitting here all alone. Those awful demons wouldn't let me go, even though I asked nicely. Which one of you is the raven, and which one is the cat?"

A silence pervaded the area. Sebastian and Stefan stared at her in disbelief. She was indeed kidnapped, but she acted as if it was a *minor* inconvenience. The silence lasted for a few more seconds before Stefan broke it.

"I'm the cat, he's the raven," Stefan pointed to Sebastian who gave her a friendly wave. "Now What happened to Foras? And the rest?"

"Franklin. Oh, I merely sent him away and his friends. He was going on and on about me ruining his plans to appease Satan, since I caught him trying to steal my concoctions, so, he decided to steal me all the way to Los Angeles. I always wanted to go here, but not like this," she tutted. "But that's not important. I see you two managed to free yourself from being familiars and for that, congratulations."

"We were going to... save you," Sebastian said, shifting on his feet. "And then we saw that you didn't need saving. We couldn't do it in animal bodies."

Agatha smiled and laughed. "A noble cause! What a shame too. I enjoyed your presence around my house but now I'll have to look for new ones."

"You don't need to do that," Sebastian responded immediately.

Stefan shot him a questioning look. "What?"

"We may not be your familiars, but I'm sure we can stop by once or twice every week or so, if you would allow that."

It wasn't going to be too much of a burden. Even as familiars, all they did was surveil the area to ensure that it was safe and that no one stole anything. Occasionally they were sent out to gather materials, but that was small stuff. That, and Agatha was an old woman. She wouldn't be alive for much longer and making her life more comfortable was the least they could do. He conveyed this perspective to Stefan, who nodded in agreement.

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“That sounds wonderful,” Agatha said, grinning. “Let’s go home, shall we? I’ve been aching for a cup of chamomile tea.”

Within one second, the three of them were transported back to the small house. Sebastian and Stefan kept their promise, always returning to Agatha three times a week, and running errands for her. In return, she weaved them both cozy scarves to wrap around their necks whenever they ventured in the Ninth Circle of Hell and treated them to cookies and tea.

And when the old witch died, they buried her in a nice, soft patch of dirt in the woods, wishing her a heartfelt farewell. It was the first time either of them cried.