

~~David~~

“Caera?” he asked.

Caera smiled, leaned in again, and kissed him again, and she didn’t pull away this time. He did, and blinked at her a few times, but whatever was going through Caera’s mind, she didn’t feel like explaining it.

She picked him up.

“Whoa, hey. Caera?”

On her butt, she put her legs out in front of her, and put him on her lap, facing her. She might not have been Acelina big, but Caera was still eight feet tall, and muscular. He was only a feather to her.

“You’re right.”

“What?”

“You’re right about demons. We’re violent, bloodthirsty, and obsessed about it. Even Daoka, sweet and innocent as she seems, can give into the urge as easily as any other demon. But…” With her giant claws holding his waist, she kissed him again, and rubbed her horns against the top of his head. “You’re right that we’re closer to humans than not. A lot of us try to ignore that, like Acelina, and Zel, but some of us know better.”

“Oh. I mean, Jes told me some stuff about her life in the hatching pit, and Dao’s Dao. And you, I… I mean, Mia and I have talked about psychology and social dynamics and stuff, and—”

She kissed him again, and this time didn’t let him pull away. She set a pair of claws behind his head and neck, and held him close, lips locked. Caera had a very short, cat-ish snout, and it made kissing her a unique experience. Not that he was some sort of expert on kissing.

“You really are delicious, you know that?” she said.

“Delicious?” Uh oh.

She laughed. “Demons fight. We kill each other over nothing. Even just an argument is enough. And you’ve figured that out by now, I’m sure.”

“Y-Yeah.”

“But you, you damn little nerd, just couldn’t let me stay out here and stew, could you? Which I was doing because I knew if I stuck around in that alcove, I’d get angrier and angrier, until a fight broke out. And that could get violent.”

Gulp.

“That violent?”

“Yes, that violent. It’s one reason Zel had that dueling law in place, to minimize needless deaths so she could bulk her army. And then the weak demons, usually culled by getting into fights with other demons, would get killed by Alessio and her demons from the Black Valley in another inevitable war.” Caera licked her fangs and ran her claws along his scalp and through his shaggy red hair. “Betrayers avoid demons who even so much as raise their voice. But not you, you persistent little nerd.”

“Hey I—”

She kissed him again and hugged him tight. Maybe a little too tight, as air suddenly became an issue. After a few awesome, uncomfortable seconds, she relaxed, and he sucked in a breath.

“You know,” he said, “on the surface, girls don’t normally—”

She rolled and lay on her side, bringing him with her, and she set her teeth on his neck. Full on big bite, on his neck, like she was going to bite down and rip out his jugular. A gazelle, under a lion’s mouth. He froze, but she didn’t clamp down, content with nuzzling her fangs and other teeth against his soft skin for a bit before letting go, and replacing teeth with her long tongue instead.

“Demons aren’t surface girls,” she said, and she half squashed him with her body as she snuggled into his side. “The way you keep just... exposing yourself to me, while being all... nice, and honest, makes me want to...” A deep rumble worked through her, a purr, and she licked his throat some more. “If you had a number, I’d make you a betrayer.”

“Umm...”

“But you don’t. Maybe that’s why I like you so much. You’re just so... I don’t know. Something about you, the way you squirm, the way you talk so openly, it makes me want to eat you.”

“Umm!”

“But in a good way. Not even in a sexual way. I just want to... I don’t know. Keep you. I understand why Daoka likes you so much.” She licked his cheek. “Even Kia and Marquez would have known to back off. They wouldn’t have wanted a fight, because they’d have known how bad it could get, when a demon gets... bloodthirsty.” It almost sounded like a dirty, tainted word, the way she said it.

“Not you. You just walk right into the path of danger. You did it for your sister. You’re doing it for me now.”

“Well, uh, I mean, right now, I’m trapped and can’t—ack!”

She bit his throat again, gentle enough to not hurt him, but it was a strange sensation, having his entire throat in her mouth, warm and wet and with a roaming tongue. Very vulnerable. Caera liked him vulnerable, apparently.

She let him go, licked him some more, kissed him some more, and sat up as she licked her chops. Slowly, she put a hand on his, and gently pinned it to the ground as she tested the size difference. So much bigger than his, and her huge claws highlighted her hand’s feminine features.

He wrapped his fingers around one of hers, and she chuckled.

“I’m going to stay out here for a while,” she said, “calm down, and watch and make sure remnants don’t start pouring down the tunnel.”

“You... want me to stay?”

Her smile softened. “Yeah.”

He did his best soft smile, too. But even he knew he wasn’t good at soft expressions, and it made Caera laughed.

“Done,” he said, and he sat up with her.

She didn’t have to ask. He got around behind her, sat against the wall nice and close, and pulled her giant tail onto his lap. Most demons had thinner tails, but Caera’s tail was as thick as one of her thick legs. He got to work, dug his thumbs into the hard flesh and muscle, and massaged. Cleaned, too, wherever he found any small rocks, especially the ones in the scratch and bite marks.

“One of the remnants got me pretty bad,” she said, “with a sharp rock. They used it like a knife.”

“I can see that.” A nasty gash decorated her tail close to her back, and he carefully plucked some dirt from the wound. Despite his fingers grazing the wound, Caera didn’t flinch, and only occasionally made a hiss. “I’m surprised they know how to use rocks as a weapon. They’re zombies... right?”

“Sort of. They’re shells of their former selves, but there’s still something left of the person they were. It wouldn’t make for a good punishment if they couldn’t realize they were being punished, right?”

He shivered. “I mean, I guess. I’d prefer to think this is just an ecosystem, without its own personal intent. But, I suppose that isn’t how Hell works, is it?”

“No. Hell exists to punish the wicked.”

“Biblical.”

She grinned over her shoulder at him and gently pressed her big tail into his chest.

“I’ll protect you.”

“Will you? ‘Cause according to Jes, demons are terrified of zombies. Which, I mean, is kinda funny, since you deal with remnants all the time.”

She nodded toward the tunnel path back the way they’d came.

“There’s a big difference between a few remnants growing out of the ground, and a few hundred remnants grabbing and biting and pulling.” She rubbed her tail against his stomach. “How are your wounds?”

He looked down at his body. Oh, right, he had a bunch of scratches and bite marks everywhere, some worse than Caera’s.

“The joys of soft skin.” He winced as he touched some of the torn skin on his wrist. And his calves. And his thighs. And his stomach. And, oh hey, his elbows, too. “Acelina spent a lot more time getting gnawed on than me.”

“But she has demon skin.” Caera pulled her tail off him, turned, and lay beside him, facing him. She set her big head on his lap, and closed her eyes. Oh god, it was like a literal Siberian tiger dinosaur monster covered in spikes with two horns had decided to take a nap on his lap.

Pet her?

Of course, pet her.

He set a hand on her head, and rubbed down hard against the top of her skull, where the black horns emerged from the dark red skin. Instant purrs from the tregeera.

“What do you think Greg is like?” she asked.

“No idea. If he’s unmarked, he might be perfectly normal? But... probably not, if he’s hanging out with Cainites.”

“You said the portal to Hell scooped you off the stairs to Heaven, right?”

“Yeah.”

“It bypassed the gates of Hell. You get your mark at the gates, where it tells you ‘Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here’. You go through that, and then the portal sucks you up. But if the portal is

just... scooping you up from places it's not supposed to reach, it might have done the same thing to other unmarked."

"Which means someone can be a murdering asshole and not get marked." He sucked in a harsh breath between his teeth. "And considering his Cainite buddies, he probably is. And considering he's unmarked, he probably has auras and who knows what else going for him. And then there's the whole cracking Hell in half problem, and—"

"Don't worry about that. You just help me reach him, and I'll kill him quick." She lifted her head, licked him, and settled back on his lap. "I'm glad you came back."

"Came back?"

"Back out here."

"Well, I mean, I couldn't leave you—"

She kissed him again, rubbed her forehead against him, and kissed him some more. Kiss turned into deep kiss, and her purr turned into a quiet growl.

"I won't let anyone hurt you."

That sounded almost dangerously possessive. He shivered, and Caera grinned at him before settling her head on his lap again.

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~~Mia~~

It wasn't working.

"Nothing?" Yosepha asked.

"There's something, but it just isn't turning on! I can say it in my head, sign it, but when I do it latches a chain onto me, and I have to lift it. Potram is so light it pretty much floats, but batlam is killing me."

The angel smiled. "I admire your determination."

Mia tried to smile back, but it was hard, sweating and panting like she was. Who knew thinking about something could be so physically demanding.

“I... I need a break.” She stumbled around in a circle for a few seconds before leaning against the cave wall. “I need some fucking carbs. And a whey shake.”

“You’re in the afterlife, Mia. You are essentially a ghost. You have no use for food.”

“Disagree! Give me some caffeine, bananas, protein, and I’d blast through this workout.” To prove her point, she flexed her arms, showing off her giant biceps. She did not have giant biceps, but still, she was fit and thin, and had the legs and butt to prove her history with the Olympic bar.

“That... is an idea.”

“Eh?”

“Perhaps this is less an issue with the difficulty of the rune, and more the fact you are a soul. Or at least, a soul of some form. Angels and demons store the resonance we consume, convert it into essence, and essence is used to fuel everything, every breath, every moment, every action. For demons, it becomes sin. For angels, it becomes grace.”

“Sounds an awful lot like how human bodies use food.”

“Indeed. But souls cannot do this. Like demons and angels, they store some essence in the body, but unlike us, they cannot tap into their inner resonance to create more, or acquire more by ingesting it. They burn very little essence unless they become injured, and even then, require only a fraction of the essence demons and angels require in order to heal and function.”

Mia groaned. “Yeah. Hell wouldn’t be all that torturous if souls died too easily.”

Sighing, Yosepha patted her on the head with a wing.

“Regardless, perhaps the issue here is that, while using potram required very little of your essence to fuel and maintain, using batlam is simply a larger request than your body has essence to give.”

“I... am getting pretty hungry.”

“I can imagine,” Yosepha said. “What I cannot imagine, is any soul having enough essence to use batlam, even on a full stomach. As you saw with Shir, when she no longer had the essence to hold onto batlam, it was lost, and she defaulted to potram; something that comes with training.” She gestured to Mia, who was naked because holy fuck using potram while trying to use batlam was not an extra challenge she needed. “Souls are meek, Mia. They cannot so much as resist the weakest of auras.”

Mia planted her ass against the wall and sank down to the ground.

“There’s a but coming, right?”

“But you are no ordinary soul. We should find you something to eat, and—”

“Can... Can you make sure it’s a forbidden fruit, and not someone’s heart?”

Yosepha tilted her head. “Unlikely. Fruits are rare. Demons eat them or hide them for later.”

“I know, I just...” Mia pulled her knees up to her chest. With her forehead against her wrist, hopefully the angel wouldn’t see her eyes. “Please?”

“Mia, this cannot wait. I will leave before the morrow, and I would prefer to be here to learn if you can use this rune. It is important for more than just yourself, but knowledge for me when dealing with the other unmarked.”

“But, if you give me a heart...” Fuck it. “I’ll see the memories again.”

“What?”

“The memories.” After a deep breath, Mia forced her head up, and met eyes with the angel. “When I eat a heart, I see the memories. The bad memories. They fill my thoughts for a few seconds, and then get... filed away, somewhere in the back of my mind, like some kind of library.”

Yosepha stared at her, drifting from surprised to angry. Uh oh.

“You only tell me this now?”

“I’m sorry! Every word out of my mouth could be my last, you know? What if I say the wrong thing, and you or Romakus decide I’m too dangerous to keep alive?”

Her point hit home, and Yosepha sighed as she walked over to her.

“I understand your concern, child. In fact, I suggest you do not speak of this to the others.”

“Vinicius knows.”

“I doubt the child of Belial will say anything he does not need to. He delights in being combative.”

“Ain’t that the truth.”

Yosepha stood over her and patted her with a wing again.

“I won’t kill you, unless you betray me, or are an immediate risk to the safety of Heaven or the Great Tower. And you said yourself, you would kill yourself if that were the case, correct?”

“I... did.”

“Then you would want to know if you were such, correct?”

“I suppose...”

The angel squatted down in front of her and set a hand on her shoulder.

“It is easy to say brave words. It is a different thing entirely to enact them.”

Mia groaned and squirmed. Called out. She was a pussy.

“When I eat a demon heart, I get very... tingly, and jazzed up. It makes me feel strong, but I also get these flashes in my mind showing me the worst things the demon has done. Violent stuff, you know?”

“And a human heart?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t had one. And... I think I’d prefer to keep it that way, if possible.”

“It won’t be possible. On this journey, you must eat when you can, and that may force some horrible choices upon you. And if you have eaten demon hearts and forbidden fruit, I can only assume you could eat a human heart without issue.”

“Unless that gives me bad memories, too.”

“Yes, that is... unfortunate.” The angel stood up and gave her a heavy nod. “Stay here.”

Before Mia could say anything, Yosepha turned and left, using her wings to propel herself with pure elegance. She flew with the grace of a hummingbird, dodging and weaving around the cave walls with ease. She also didn’t go back to the potram rune, keeping her armor on instead.

It wasn’t long before she returned, sword and shield gone, and each hand holding a heart, blood included.

“That was fast.”

“Yes,” the angel said. “I can be quite persuasive.”

Mia raised a brow. Joke? The angel’s face was stern and hard, as usual. The ultimate straight man... woman. No wonder Romakus loved teasing her.

“One’s bigger than the other,” Mia said, and gestured to the two hearts.



“Some demons were returning from a hunt. I... alleviated them of their prize. One is a vratorin heart. The other is human.” Yosepha squatted in front of her again, wings out, and she handed both of the big muscle lumps to Mia. “Eat.”

“Ugh.” Groaning like waking up on a Saturday morning too early, she took the hearts. They were warmer than they should have been, as if the resonance and essence within kept them fresh and... tasty. “You don’t want one?”

“I cannot gain resonance this way.”

“What?”

Yosepha smiled, but it was weak. Even a little sad?

“Angels cannot acquire the resonance of someone who did not offer it willingly.” She leaned in close enough to almost touch noses, and whispered. “Do not share that information.”

“Would be dangerous if demons found out?” It wasn’t easy to keep the eye connection considering how intense the angel’s dark eyes were, but Mia managed, somehow.

“No. I have told you nothing that you could use against us, but that does not mean I want demons gossiping about angels. They know little of our kind, and we would keep it that way.” She nudged Mia’s hands. “Eat, and describe to me what you see.”

Sighing, Mia took a bite of the demon heart. Sure enough, a swarm of memories hit her, some tiny, some large, all revolving around the vratorin committing heinous acts of violence. Killing, killing, and more killing. Did Adron do things like this? Yes, undoubtedly, but was he this bad?

It wasn’t long before the heart was gone. The tingling filled her, warmed her, made her aches and pains go away, and made her want to get up and go do something. Anything. Punch someone. Fuck someone. Life poured through her, out into her fingertips, and made her feel so damn good.

The human heart waited. Yosepha waited.

“Do you have the room for the second heart as well?” Yosepha asked.

“Room? You mean, do I feel full?”

“Yes. A vratorin heart is no small meal.”

“I mean, I don’t feel hungry anymore, but full? What’s it like to feel full on essence? Or... Or resonance, if I’m somehow absorbing that, too.” Considering she was absorbing memories, the idea had been haunting her for a while. It was yet another nail in the not-human coffin.

“It is a difficult sensation to describe, but I suppose it is similar to how you would feel on the surface.”

“Then definitely not. How many hearts does that take?”

“I am not sure. You would have to ask a demon, or another soul. Regardless, eat the human heart.”

Mia winced and looked at the hunk of meat in her hand. For a second she wanted to throw it away, and maybe fake being full, but that ship had sailed, and this was too important to get squeamish about.

She ate the heart. It was just as delicious as the demon’s, and just like the demon’s, it flooded her mind with flashes.

A woman, spreading lies to get herself a promotion. Spreading lies to ruin someone else’s relationship. Whoever she was, she put some sort of cleaner in someone’s food, poisoning them. She lied and got someone else arrested for something she did. Frequent drunk driving; the memories of that were a messy blur. Just an all around horrible bitch, but probably with a low number. And her heart tasted fucking divine.

Mia stood back up, wiped the blood from her mouth and fingers as best she could, and did some quick stretches that were probably useless.

“Full?”

“Not yet.”

Yosepha frowned, but gestured to her.

“Regardless, best to try again now.”

“Okay.”

Yosepha backed away, and Mia signed the rune in her head once more. The fingers that plucked the strings traced the lines of the rune, and again, the weight of its existence crashed into her like a truck, a truck she had to also lift.

The energy tingling through her limbs grabbed the weight, and lifted, or at least stopped the weight from sending her to the ground. It latched onto her, pulled on her, tried to crush her, and Mia clenched her teeth together until a dentist would have screamed.

A gold glow enveloped her, and a new type of weight hit her, something physical and real, and hard. Armor? The weight pulling on her soul didn’t abate, though, and demanded she lift it more. It was

like a deadlift, and she was stuck halfway. But she could keep going. She pulled, and pulled, and pulled, panting louder until her voice turned into a clenched groan.

The gold glow turned red.

The shift in color snapped her attention, demanded she notice the change. It felt different, less warm, and more... visceral?

She let go of the weight. The glow vanished, and Mia collapsed to her ass again, sweat dripping down her skin.

“Almost,” Mia said. “Almost.”

“Indeed. It takes less essence to maintain a rune, once equipped, but equipping it takes the most effort.” Yosepha squatted down in front of her and patted her with a wing. “For a moment, I thought I would see you emerge, dressed as an angel. But—”

“Yeah, the color shifted. The feel of it shifted. It... It’s different from yours.”

“I suppose that was inevitable. We know your potram creates a different result than an angel’s. Why wouldn’t batlam?” Sighing, Yosepha turned and headed for the exit. “I can delay no longer.”

“But—”

“If you continue to practice, you will eventually learn to use the rune. Each time you try, it will require less energy, and you will be able to summon it more readily to the mind. But you must be careful. We do not know what will happen, and whatever you do, you will garner attention. Stealth is your ally.”

“Stealth, right. Sneaking across the hellscape with a giant bodyguard, I’m not sure stealth will be an option all the time.”

“True. But... please, be careful, if you would?”

Mia smiled. “I will, definitely. And thank you. Thank you so much. I’ve been terrified about this journey, and you’re the first person I’ve met that... you know...”

The angel returned the smile, far warmer than the battle warrior probably did with others.

“You are welcome.”

“B-But, before you go, can I ask a favor?”

“Perhaps. What do you desire?”

“Since these runes seem to require touch to transfer into my head, they’ve got to be the same with David. I know I put these runes in his head when we touched when he rescued me. Touching you helped me make potram and batlam ‘click’, so I can try and use them. I... don’t know if that’s the only way to make them click, but, if you, or some other angel could find David, and help him too? That’d be... that’d be really nice.”

Yosepha’s smile faded.

“Mia—”

“Please? He’s my brother. He literally ran into the spire, on his own, in the middle of a battle, to try and get to me. If there’s anyone that’ll get to the Forgotten Place, it’s him. He’s stubborn, you know? Stubborn like you can’t imagine. You can trust him to make it.”

The angel looked away and down the path she faced, and silence fell on the two of them. Mia had just asked something big, bigger than she’d thought.

“I will... see. I make no promises.”

“Thank you! Even if you can’t, thank you for trying.”

Yosepha smiled at her again, almost like she hadn’t expected Mia to say that.

“You’re welcome.”

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~~Day 40~~

~~David~~

“Thank you.”

David froze, and looked back and up at the huge demoness. The rest of the group were ahead of them, and instead of the semi-brisk pace they’d been using since the angel attack, they’d slowed down. People needed to heal from their wounds, and the demons now took the time to clear out the bloodgrip enough for Acelina to get by, hence why she stayed in the rear with David. They also took the time to kill any remnants they found; no zombie ambushes again, thank you very much.

“I uh, what?”

“I would have died in that death pit. You risked your life saving mine when I did not ask.”

“Oh. That. I mean, I... you’re welcome? I didn’t really think of it like that, you know? We’re in this together. I kinda just... went.”

“Yes... So I noticed.” The enormous demon sighed, and even with her wings hooked on her shoulders like a cloak, they drooped. “Don’t tell the others.”

“Tell them what?”

“That I... said those words.”

He raised a brow and looked back at the demons ahead of them. The only reason they probably didn’t hear Acelina, was all their grunts of exertion from destroying bloodgrip, and the screams of dying remnants.

“Yeah, sure, no problem.” Demons had to keep up appearances, after all. And as much as that thought made him smile, it wasn’t exactly strange, even among humans. Maybe a little juvenile, like high schools students who couldn’t admit fault lest they damage their reputation, but it wasn’t so juvenile when doing so could get you killed.

She opened her mouth just barely wide enough to show him a tiny shark smile before hiding it again.

“You saved me too, ya know,” he said.

“You were within arm’s reach.”

“Yes, but...”

“And you are light and weak”—ow—“and easy to lift.”

“Yes, but...”

She hissed down at him and whipped his back with her tail. Double ow.

“Must you make this so difficult for me?”

He grinned back up at her. “Sorry.”

She growled, but it didn’t have any bite to it.

“You are an interesting creature, David.”

“You sure? I’m a dime a dozen on the surface.”

“Hardly. You are persistent to a fault, and open your mouth when any soul down here would know to shut it.”

“I... Yeah, that’s true. I’m a complainer. I really have a tough time shutting up.”

She laughed. “How annoying.”

Smiling, he looked back to the path ahead. He didn’t need Mia to tell him Acelina was more comfortable being mean than sincere, and honestly, it was kinda fun. There were more similarities between her and Jes than they realized.

And it’d hadn’t been very long since the nine-foot-tall demoness with breasts nearly as big as his torso, had made him cum, several times. Her body coated in his cum, filled with it, and—

Acelina flicked him on the back of the head. Unlike a finger, claws hit hard.

“I can feel your aura. Stop that.”

“Sorry. Sorry.”

After another not-so-serious growl, Acelina fell back into silence, but when he glanced back at her, he could see she looked happier. Some pep in her step, maybe? Or just that her wings weren’t drooping as much?

“Mia was annoying as well.”

“Yeah?” he asked. “How much did you see her at the spire?”

“Only twice. She visited the hatching pit and immediately annoyed me. Quite full of herself, despite her obvious fear.”

“That... kinda sounds like Mia, yeah. She can get kinda uppity when she’s put in a bad position, like a small dog. Sometimes she’ll stay quiet. Sometimes she’ll start yelling.”

“But not you?”

“I mean, sometimes? I prefer to shut up and calculate.”

“Calculate...”

“Told you he’s a nerd,” Jes said, looking back at them. “He—” She tripped over Laara, right over the mini gargoyle, and the two collapsed onto the ground. “You fucking little—”

Daoka hopped back, put a hand over her lover’s mouth, and shook her head frantically as she gestured down the path. Everyone had stopped, even Caera, and only when everyone had grown dead silent did she move ahead in a slow prow, like a tiger sneaking through the brush.

There was movement ahead, flickering in the shadows of the curving tunnel walls. Stealth mode. The problem with that was they couldn't get against the wall or hide behind any boulders; no boulders to be had, and bloodgrip was everywhere.

Caera held up a hand and gestured to the Las. The little ladies wasted no time, swarmed around David, and got his armor back on him. Daoka gave him back the huge dagger, and Jes picked up some dirt and rubbed it into his forehead. Etched it in, more like, with claws, and David clenched his fists as he bit down the urge to yelp and push her away. He needed a number if the disguise was going to work.

“Create an opening,” Caera whispered, “and I'll be there.”

Create an opening, right. Chat up the Cainites like last time? He nearly died last time.

It didn't matter. He was committed, and this was the path toward the temple anyway, along with Renato.

Fully geared and carrying a hundred pounds of metal, he dragged his ass to the next curve of the tunnel, and listened. No talking. He listened closer. Still no talking, but there were a few clicks, so quiet they might as well have been pebbles rolling down the beach.

He stepped out around the corner, and froze.

“Caera,” he said, “you can come out.”

“It's not Cainites?”

He slowly shook his head, and waited for Caera to take lead again. And when she did, the inevitable followed.

“No!” She dashed forward into the next cavern, but there wasn't anything to be done.

It was a massacre. A mess of bones littered the ground, demon and human, with a dozen meera weapons sticking out of the stone. Bits of armor lay about, but less than a battle scene like this should have had. The bodies had been picked clean, and weren't bodies anymore. Skeletons.

A few creatures lifted their heads from the mess, and while they'd moved in David's direction, the moment Caera came into view, they ran. Big spider-like creatures called fallo spiders ran off, each the size of a large dog. Terrifying, but skittish, like big tarantulas if tarantulas were red, black, and spiky. They'd caused the flickering shadows.

Against the back wall was a large skeleton with just enough flesh left to keep the bones together. A tetrad, someone with two arms and hooves, and judging from the mess of bones around them, wings. A korgejin then, like Renato was. But the skeleton had no head.

He didn't ask why. Anyone who killed a tetrad would take the head for a trophy.

"Renato!" Caera pushed the other bones aside, threw aside others with a scream, and stopped in front of the skeleton of her old friend. Silence fell on the cave with the weight of a frozen blanket, complete with stabbing pain as the cold sank into David's chest.

Daoka clicked a couple times, but her voice trailed off as she came closer and stood in the middle of the mess.

"Looks like a battle, yeah," Jeskura said, and she squatted down beside the satyr to examine some bones. "I'm seeing a couple dozen human bodies, at least. A few succubi, one incubus, a vratorin, and a gorgala. Some imps and grems, too."

"Renato's friends," Caera said between clenched teeth. "He liked to be lazy, and let them do all they work. But he protected them when they needed it. It was... They were happy."

Wincing, David joined Dao and Jes, and gave Caera her distance. If that really was Renato's corpse, he'd been dead for at least a few days, long enough for most of the flesh to melt off the bones. Judging from her reaction, she'd liked him more than anyone had figured. It was not the time to come up to her and comfort her, not yet.

The Las scouted around, and it wasn't long before they were whining as they scooped up some little bones. Imp and grem bones. They sat with each other and whimpered, and after a few minutes, got back up and left the bones behind. They drifted toward Caera, and sat nearby, looking at her and the giant skeleton with big, sad eyes.

It was a rough scene. Bones were everywhere in Hell, left over from demons or souls from their first death, and their remains littered the land. But seeing demons lament put a whole new twist on things that turned the scary, disturbing scenery into something... else, something that didn't fit Hell at all. Like, a funeral, with people gathered around a coffin, crying and mourning.

David's heart rate jumped, and he took a small step back and looked away.

"David?" Jes asked.

"Nothing. Don't worry about me." He gave her his best 'nothing's wrong' smile, found a spot in the cave near the wall away from the demons, and watched. Slow, deep breaths, David.

It was a painful memory, and it'd be shallow to bring it up.

Dao and Jes both looked at him for a while, but let it go and moved on to Caera. They said nothing to her, though. They squatted down beside her and looked the tetrad's skeleton up and down.



“Scratch marks,” Jes said, and she gestured to a few different places. “They stabbed him deep, in a dozen different places.” Her wing gently gestured out at the bones around. “Looks like he took down a dozen souls, at least.”

“A dozen souls couldn’t kill a tetrad,” Caera said. “They must have used imbued weapons.”

“Probably, yeah.”

Jes knew how to deal with Caera. Straight, to-the-point talk about the problem at hand: the Cainites.

Daoka clicked a few times and gestured to the other tunnels connecting in the distance.

“About a day from here,” Caera said, “if you know the straightest path. I do.”

Nodding, Jes reached down and scooped up one of the meera swords. Dented, but that wouldn’t matter when hitting flesh.

“Las,” David said. “Help me out?”

The four little ladies hopped over, their sad eyes shifted to joyful in a matter of seconds, and they wasted no time helping him take off the extra bits of his heavy disguise he didn’t need right now. Dagger, too. Not weighed down by a whole second person’s worth of weight, he wiped off some sweat, thanked the impas and gremlas, and looked back to Caera. She hadn’t moved.

Daoka clicked a couple times, quiet, right into Caera’s ear, before she patted the tregeera on the shoulder and moved on to join Jes. She found the biggest axe she could and handed it to Acelina. No way a Cainite wielded that axe, even one full of demon hearts; it was probably Renato’s, or another demon’s.

Acelina took it, looked down at it, experimented with the weight, and nodded.

“Next time we run into some Cainites,” Jeskura said, “don’t bother with the armor, David. It’ll slow you down too much, and guaranteed we’re getting into a fight.”

“Battle! Fight!” Lasca handed David back the dagger.

Wincing, David took the blade back. The hilt was only just barely big enough to wield it with two hands, but he had to if he wanted a real chance of using the heavy thing.

“Stay out of the fight, David,” Caera said, “if you can.”

“Yeah, will do.”

“If the boy can use that gold light again, perhaps he can help us?” Acelina asked.

Caera shrugged, nodded in a direction, and got moving.

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They found another alcove to hide in. No one said a word. Everyone found a comfortable spot to sit, and Caera and David took first watch. There were fallo spiders around, and they had to tear down the spiderwebs — damn strong webbing — to make room for everyone to sit down, but they managed.

Caera sat by the alcove entrance, and David sat with her. He sat close, too, close enough they almost touched, testing the water to see how she'd react. The last thing David wanted whenever he was the one bursting at the skin with anger, was for someone to come comfort him. Hell, someone getting into his personal space was enough to make him go from angry to livid on a normal day, back on the surface. Was Caera the same way? Would he even be the same way, after everything he'd been through?

Caera didn't react. He reached out and put a hand on her back. She didn't react. He rubbed her back, dug his fingers between the spikes, and forced his knuckles into the hard skin and harder muscles. She reacted, but only barely, just enough to lean in a little closer to him. A flicker of movement from her eyes, a small smile, and back to watchdog mode.

They sat there with only distant remnants making sound, and let the hours go by. Twilight came and went, and Caera slid in a little closer to him until their legs touched.

“Don't die,” she said.

What to say to make her feel better? Something smooth. Something confident, and manly.

“Didn't plan on it.” Hey, that wasn't bad. “Don't die either, okay?”

She smiled down at him, licked his forehead, and curled her tail around behind him until it half surrounded him. It was another hour before it was time to switch shifts, and it went by quick.

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~~Mia~~

She tried again. She failed again. She tried and tried and tried, and what Yosepha said about it getting easier was true, but it was still like asking someone who'd only just recently started playing the piano to play Flight of the Bumblebee. Yeah, it got easier, but it was still going to take years and years of work. She had days.

Groaning, body aching, she dragged herself back to Vinicius's alcove. It was both of theirs, but she'd spent a lot of time without him lately, either with Yosepha or alone. She wasn't worried about him leaving; the leash didn't allow it. If he tried to actually escape, or tried in any way to put distance between him and her beyond a point, the leash would activate and shock him. She was free to roam around, but not him. The necklace knew his intent.

He was alone, sitting, and examining his wounds. Like Mia had a million times after a workout, he worked through his joints, testing them for aches and pains by gently swinging his arms or bending them into strange positions.

"Feel better?" she asked.

"Yes."

"Fully healed?"

"Y—"

"You're not fully healed, Vin." She gestured to the scars on his body, spots where the skin was red, while the rest of him was dark red, even black in some places. "The fuck you in a hurry for?"

"I'd rather we saved the world before it ended and took me with it."

"Uh huh." She put her hands on her hips and stood between the giant's legs. Perfect glaring distance. "Where's Julisa?"

"I don't know."

"I doubt that. She's been dying to get on those dicks again. Where is she?"

Sighing, he gestured past her toward the exit.

"Likely talking with Livian and devising a way to seduce me." For some reason, he said that with just the barest hint of sadness and frustration.

"And that's bad because...?"

"I am trying to heal."

Mia laughed and gently kicked one of his legs.

“You got at least one, and probably a half dozen demonettes nearby who want to fuck you, Vin. To get fucked by you. On the surface, a guy could be in a coma for years, and if I told him there were six girls who wanted to fuck him, at the same time, sitting around his bed, he’d wake up with a hard-on.”

“This is not the surface. I am not a... guy.”

“Not a guy? I... I guess that’s true, yeah. Demons and angels aren’t technically male or female, are you?” She stepped over his leg, put her back against the cave wall, and sank, exhausted. At least she’d kept her potram rune going, this time. “Demons are all pretty aggressive about their desires, aren’t they?”

“Usually.”

“And they don’t seem to go with the usual social dynamics on the surface. The girl flirts and puts up some signals saying ‘come get me’. The guy flirts back and tries to get her.” She put up her hands as a disclaimer. “I mean, you know, societal standards and all that.”

Vin tilted his head, but said nothing. He didn’t understand. And that was kinda awesome in a strange way, that human standards, culture standards, none of that stuff ever crossed his mind. But she had to keep in mind what Yosepha said, that Heaven had no rules for the better, and Hell had no rules for the worse.

“My point is,” she said, “this isn’t the surface, and demons are all horny all the time.” Not that she was much better. “The lady demons here will happily be the aggressive partner. All you need to do is sit there and look pretty.” She grinned up at him, but alas, Vin didn’t so much as rumble. Did the big guy even have a sense of humor? Maybe he’d laugh if she made a joke about... breaking bones and erupting organs.

“They probably would.”

“Okay, well, Julisa wants to fuck you again. Why not let her?”

He shrugged with his good shoulder, and a slow rumble flowed out of him, like a truck sighing.

“I spent over two centuries in a prison, being tortured by a...” He ground his teeth. “I am... not myself...” Shaking his head, he gestured to her. “You saw.”

“In Zel’s cell? I did, yeah, but what’s that got to do with—”

“I am not... recovered.”

She got back up and looked at him, but Vin's eyes drifted toward the alcove. He was listening for anyone eavesdropping. What he just said amounted to admitting weakness, a mental weakness at that, and that was definitely not something demons did, male-like or female-like.

"You were in there a long time. But, I thought demons didn't really get hit with time like a human." She paced in front of his giant feet, eyes down, thinking mode. "I guess I hadn't really thought about it much past that. Even if you do deal with time better than humans do, over two hundred years of being..." Tortured, by someone Vin considered weak scum. Yeesh.

She paused and looked up at him. Christ, she was out of her depth. How the fuck did she even begin to understand how someone like Vin processed his situation and circumstance?

Did she want to?

Yes! Yes, she wanted to. Even if it was dumb. Even if it was really, really fucking dumb that she gave a shit about Vin and his feelings, she wanted to understand. He was feeling fucked up, by his wounds, his situation, the leash, a whole bunch of shit. Having the Damall see him so weak and vulnerable was probably pissing him off right down to his bones.

She missed her laptop. She'd have written all this down, and maybe shared it with her classmates. Demon psychology 202: how to understand the mind of a real predator.

Time for a topic change.

"Think Yosepha will come back?"

"She'll have to."

"What? Why?"

He snorted. "She underestimates Heaven's abilities. The council probably knows what she's doing."

Oh fuck.

"B-But, she... she's..." She got between Vin's legs and waved her arms. "We have to warn her!"

He snorted again and shook his head.

"She's gone."

"Why the fuck didn't you warn her before!?"

"Would she have believed me?"

“I... don’t know.” Groaning, Mia paced around and around and pulled on her hair. “How would the council know?”

“I have dealt with angels several times. Sometimes, they know things they shouldn’t, where things are happening.” He thumped his wounded tail on the floor softly. “The council can see Hell. I don’t know by how much, but they can.”

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~~Day 41~~

Vin didn’t sleep as much as he should have. He didn’t feel comfortable with the Damall, and took turns watching the entrance of their alcove, even though she told him she wouldn’t be doing the same. Not that she trusted Romakus. She didn’t. But she trusted Yosepha, and much as Romakus liked pushing Yosepha, that seemed to be purely a sexual, maybe even romantic thing. When shit got real, Yosepha seemed perfectly capable of bossing Romakus around. He wouldn’t betray her, and as long as he wouldn’t, the other demons wouldn’t. They liked their boss.

She tried to not think about Vin’s words, but every so often, she glanced up at the ceiling, checking for hidden eyeballs. If the angel council really could see what they were up to, that’d make everything a million times harder. But if that was true, why weren’t angels coming down on them right now?

Okay, another thing onto the pile of mysteries to solve: how did the council’s ability to track things happening in Hell work?

Sighing, Mia rocked back and forth on the ground, and let a cascade of thoughts run her over like a train. She was simultaneously exhausted from trying to use batlam, bored from sitting around doing nothing else, and overwhelmed with thoughts and memories.

What would David do? He’d recap. Make a list. Understand it.

She had an aura, a weird aura, a very Hell-like and Heaven-like aura, an aura of... the world, an aura that couldn’t be resisted. She could use angel runes, or at least one of them. She gained memories whenever she ate a heart, nasty memories of bad things. She could read an ancient language likely spoken by the archangels. She literally absorbed an assortment of runes, maybe even some sort of obtuse language, when she touched a book written by Lucifer himself, maybe some sort of real...er

version of the ancient language? A version that had power? It used different symbols, but they were similar, nonetheless.

Oh, and of course, if she got close to another unmarked, horrible shit went down. Hell-shattering, world-ending shit.

What about her new libido? Much as she wanted to blame that on her new body, her afterlife body, it was probably more like her new body simply didn't have the limitations her surface body did. It certainly didn't have the physical limitations. Adron and Kas had proved that. Vin's tongue had proved that. And Julisa had said Mia's body had adapted to the large thing penetrating her a lot faster than betrayers did.

Her new body was unusual in a whole bunch of ways, but her ridiculous libido was just her.

Christ, she needed something to do. Go on the internet. Doom-scroll on social media and lament the ruined future. Have an existential crisis. Destroy her attention span and ability to focus for any longer than thirty seconds at a time. All that good stuff. She was damn happy to have some time to recover, relax, and prepare for the inevitable, deadly journey across Hell, but as a great hobbit once said, waiting on the edge of a battle you can't escape is even worse. She was going stir crazy.

Noise from the connecting tunnel drew her eyes. A devorjin brute walked past the alcove, with a bat girl on his back. Yulia, and she looked panicked.

Mia hopped up, wearing her potram rune, took a second to make sure it covered her bits — problematic with the absurdly sexy clothes — and chased after her. Vinicius didn't follow. Probably for the best, until he healed.

"Yulia, you okay?" Mia asked.

Yulia looked back at her, chirped a couple times, and patted her nameless friend on his big bald head. He turned around, and his big, scary demon face lit up. Both spent a little longer than necessary eying her new clothes.

Brutes weren't exactly attractive, but not exactly ugly either, and their big, muscly... brutish shapes and demony skull-ish faces were scary, but also kinda alluring in that big bad monster way. Mia had, on occasion, read silly little erotic fiction about monsters like that, taking a girl and—

She slapped herself, both cheeks, same time. Enough.

"Are you an angel?" Yulia asked. "'Cause you can wear runes and have an aura and—"

“Nope, not even a little bit, far as Yosepha can tell. I don’t have grace or any of that.” She came closer. Not easy to do, considering the brute Yulia rode stared straight at Mia and her body. “Where’re you off to? You look like you’re trying to get somewhere fast... which I’m slowing down.”

“It’s okay. Romakus is there already.”

“There? What’s going on? It’s not the other angels, is it?”

“No. Hellbeasts.”

“Hellbeasts?”

The bat girl waved her wing-arms a few times.

“Hellbeasts! Lots of them live deep underground. They don’t normally bother us, but sometimes they do. We have to cull them when that happens.”

“Eep.” Mia stuck her head back into her alcove. “Vinicius! We should help them.”

The dragon rumbled, said nothing, and didn’t move.

“Come on,” she said. “I know you’re healing, but you can deal with some... what kind of hellbeasts?” she asked Yulia.

“Some goorts mostly, some fallos, and some cannams.”

“Cannams?”

“Hellhounds.”

Eep again. Hannah had warned her about hellhounds before, and Mia remembered what the goorts had been like when they’d nearly killed Adron. And then, of course, there was the big wurm Vinicius had dealt with.

Mia poked her head back into her alcove.

“Come on!”

He snorted and said nothing.

“Oh come on, please? The Damall are helping us, and so’s Yosepha. We should help them. I know you’re healing, but just be careful and work with the other demons, and you should be fine, right? Cooperation.” She realized the mistake as soon as she made it. The dreaded C word.



Vin growled at her, but she stood her ground and glared up at him. After a long staring match, the beast relented, rumbling and grumbling but standing up, anyway. Wow. She'd expected to have to yell at him or something, or leave him so she could go see what was happening herself.

Yulia's friend resumed his brisk walk, and Mia had to borderline jog to keep up. Vinicius didn't, long legs and all, and each step made a quiet impact rumble, like she had a mini T-Rex following her. Doing double duty, Yulia also killed any remnants they came across, but didn't take the time to clean off the ground. Mia jumped over, sidestepped, and avoided the gore and blood, but the little she touched stained the bottom of her sandals, not her feet.

She had sandals. Holy shit, she'd forgotten she had sandals now.

Other demons joined them as they went deeper into the mountain. Every so often they found a big batch of remnants, and the cruel history of the mountain became all too obvious as every ten or twenty feet they descended, they found increasingly odd arrays of them. Odd, epic, and disturbing.

One cavern had its entire ceiling covered in them, thousands of them, but the ceiling was also covered in vines, and the remnants tore themselves apart. Another cavern had a small lava river cutting along it, and remnants grew around its edges, cooking alive. Another had remnants growing only up to their necks, so only their heads were free, and fallo spiders feasted on them.

And there was Mia, wearing sexy clothes, all dolled up with makeup, walking along with other demons around the tortures of Hell. It was so dissonant, it made her sick. She clenched her eyes shut and blocked out their screams as best she could, and swallowed down the nausea pulsing in her stomach. Maybe she shouldn't have agreed to help with this.

The next cavern struck her cold. Statues lined the walls, demons of all kinds, and many held statues of humans. Mia had seen a lot of statues in Hell, but they were always of demons. The slaughter Faust told her about had apparently left such an impression on Hell, she'd grown statues honoring the event, and she didn't hold back. Each human statue, a naked man or woman, was in a state of pure terror, as a demon ripped them apart.

It was a memory. A nasty, horrible, god awful memory, something Hell wouldn't forget.

An awful lot like the memories Mia picked up, eating demon hearts, and apparently human hearts.

"This is horrible," she said, gesturing around.

The demons with them didn't agree. Yulia looked at Mia, confused, while the few vrats, brutes, and gargoyles they'd picked up along the way laughed.

Vinicius rumbled at them, and they all shut up. Good.

“Hell honors the terrible,” Vin said.

“Hell is a bitch, then.”

“Yes, she is.”

She looked back at her bodyguard, scanning for any signs of a joke. He was serious.

Many of the statues were covered in spiderwebs, big thick strands — compared to surface spiders anyway — that’d give even a human trouble if they stumbled onto a bunch of them.

“Lots of silk down here,” Yulia said back to Mia. “We should harvest it!”

“How does that work?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. The succubi and incubi know how.”

There wasn’t any sign of Faust, Gallius, or the others. Maybe they were already ahead, dealing with the hellbeast threat? Hard to imagine that. But then again, maybe Faust would surprise her.

Mia stopped jogging long enough to check out one statue that wasn’t in the middle of ripping a human apart. A twelve-foot-tall goliath of muscle, with a short dragon snout, and four arms. No wings, either. Another child of Belial.

“Anyone you know?” Mia asked back at Vin.

Vin snarled at the statue, even stared at it for a bit, but said nothing. Still, she was getting better at reading his body language, the flexing fingers and rigid tail, all signs he was upset. If he’d been in better condition, he might have unleashed some of his rage, but for all the demon’s obvious desire to go on slaughter sprees and rend the hellscape into a battlefield, he could control his temper. Maybe over two hundred years in a prison cell had changed him?

They found the tetrads eventually, and the other demons. The path connected to a big tunnel, wide enough for the three tetrads to stand shoulder to shoulder without issue, with a brute on the outside of their phalanx. It was dark, with few amber veins, and the walls screamed and churned endlessly with remnants, desperate to grab onto them.

Say one thing for Romakus, Julisa, and Livian, they weren’t the type to order other people around make them do the work. They had brutes, vrats, and gargoyles around them, but it was the three biggest demons in the front of the pack, fighting the oncoming swarm.

Swarm. Stampede, more like. Goorts were huge, work horses with giant muscles and two enormous ram horns, perfectly capable of killing a vrat on their own. Or a basilisk, if they worked together. Someone like Yulia would die instantly if she got under their hooves.

They charged together, too, and crashed into Romakus hard enough his talons dragged along the stone. He slammed his sword down on them, and the gore splattered.

Mia took a step back and got behind one of Vinicius's legs. Okay, yeap, maybe coming down here was a bad idea.

Julisa grabbed one goort, threw it over her shoulder in a sort of flip body slam maneuver, using her four arms to keep it under control, and it landed hard enough something cracked. She sank two sets of claws into the giant creature's exposed stomach, ripped it open, and kicked it aside before turning back to face the stampede again. It bled out quickly. Livian did similar, grabbing a goort and lifting the beast before slamming it into the ground in front of her. The brute beside her grabbed it, wrestled it, got his thick arms around its throat, and broke its neck.

There were dozens of the massive creatures in the tunnel, clicking and growling, and the death of their frontliners meant nothing to them. Of course, the demons didn't give a shit if the hellbeasts came at them with suicidal animal rage. To them, this was fun, and Romakus borderline cheered as more goorts charged them. It was an excuse for him to use his enormous sword.

Yulia hopped off her brute's back, and the devorjin joined the other demons, killing and slaughtering with his bare hands. He might not have been as big as a tetrad, but he was bigger than all the other demons, and even the giant horse monsters couldn't beat him. The vrats and gargoyles were smart enough to keep the bigger demons between them and the oncoming horde, and were quick to eviscerate any of the smaller goorts that got past.

Thank god, because some creatures slipping past the demon barricade were fallo spiders, big ones. Like the other hellbeasts, they had the same dark red skin as demons, though decidedly less... skin-like. Even the goorts' skin didn't look like demon skin, more bumpy and rough and leathery. But they didn't look as different from demons as demons probably thought they did. And there was the fact they clicked, too, the Hellian language.

The implications were big. Did the demons care? Nope. Hellbeasts were a menace to exterminate, with no resonance to eat. And considering how mindlessly the beasts charged forward, throwing their lives away as they pushed headlong into the wall of demons, only to get ripped open and cut in half, Mia couldn't blame the demons for thinking that.

Still, it was hard to watch.

Yulia and some of the other demons in the back with Mia picked up rocks and got to work. One hard throw with quality aim was enough to knock a spider off the ceiling, and the demons jumped it with practiced expertise. The spider's legs weren't tipped with furry paws, like surface spiders. They were tipped with spikes, black, sharp enough to stab, and the spider attempted to do so, but on its back, it couldn't get a handle on what was happening.

They ripped its legs off as they stabbed it, and it shrieked and clicked as it died. Mia looked away.

Vinicius snarled and stepped forward, his size burying her in his presence. Before she got to ask what he was doing, he brought down a fist, and crushed a fallo spider. Mia squeaked and jumped back, and covered her eyes as the creature twisted and squirmed, large exoskeleton body squashed in the center. Mia wasn't the sort of girl who had trouble killing insects, but she'd always made sure to only do it if letting the bug out outside wasn't really an option, and she always ended it quickly when she killed them. But her bodyguard was quite content to break the big spider's middle, and leave it to shriek, struggle, squirm, and bleed to death.

At least, until he looked down at her, saw her frowning up at him, let out an annoyed rumble, and sank his claws into the spider's head. Tiny head, big claws. There was no head left when he was done.

"Thank you," she said.

He rumbled again and gently pushed her back with his tail.

"How nice of you to join us!" Romakus yelled back over his shoulder. "Sleeping beauty pulling his weight?"

Vinicius didn't dignify that with an answer.

The snarls and clicks of the goorts died down, but a new sound mixed into them, a new growling, and... barks? New creatures crashed against the tetrads, and the three massive demons changed their stances, half crouching with arms more forward. With the goorts, the demons were happy to accept their charges, wrestle them down, bash them, fight them straight on. They didn't want to do that with the new wave of beasts.

The goorts still fighting to get past didn't stop, like a line of water buffalo crashing into a wall of demon muscle, and the hellhounds used them. The giant wolf-lion creatures jumped across the backs of enormous horses and threw themselves over the heads of the tetrads. Livian and Julisa each caught one using their extra arms, but several got over Romakus's head, the tetrad too busy cleaving through the goorts in front of him.

Cannam, hellhounds, were huge. One landed in front of Vinicius and ducked its head left and right as it looked for a way to get past the much bigger creature to reach Mia. There was nothing in its animal eyes but hunger, and rage.

It looked slightly canine, but with the musculature and size of a large lion. It even had a mane, sort of, a bunch of black spikes close to its thick neck that flowed back and away from its head. Big, white teeth. A single black spike curled back and up from its forehead. It had a line of black spikes along its spine, too, all the way to the tip of its long tail. Big, black claws.

It dashed to the side, agile as a cat, and dove for Mia, but Vinicius slammed one of his hands down, and forced the creature to dodge. It was an opening a nearby vrat took advantage of, and brought his sword down on the creature. But the blade didn't get through the spikes, and the huge dog set its attention on demon instead. It pounced, and the vrat went down.

“Vin, help him!”

Vin snarled, and the two of them had a glaring contest again. No need to say it, or even gesture to her necklace. She'd use it if she had to.

Vin reached down, grabbed the huge dog with two hands, and ripped it in half. The vrat, on his back and now covered in a dozen bite wounds and gashes, but alive, dragged himself back to his feet. Only to fall back down when Vin dropped the two halves of the corpse on him. A bloody mess, and the vrat didn't even get a heart to eat for it. Hellbeasts held no resonance.

The juggernaut's giant tail nudged Mia further back, but he was anything but gentle with the next hellhound that came for them. It again tried to get past the bigger demon, but it didn't have much sense of self preservation; not that demons had much, either. It tried to jump around, but Vin was ready for it, and he got the giant dog with one hand. Big as Vin was, the canine really was as big as a lion, with enough weight it made Vin nearly fall back, but he turned with it, and got all four hands onto the giant dog as he pinned it. It bit him, drew blood, but a moment later it was in pieces.

Mia had underestimated the threat. Or maybe Yulia had, letting her come. Either way, Mia backed up again and again as more beasts made their way past the three tetrads, and the whole cavern turned into a mess of violence. The animals came at them, practically ignoring each other, all for the chance to go for a kill against a demon, or Mia. All this, for a meal.

Demons ate resonance. Hellbeasts, like souls, ate and survived on essence directly. Souls carried resonance and essence, and so did demons, but hellbeasts only carried essence. It was a fucked up food chain, where hellbeasts were free to attack demons and eat them, but not the other way around. And

they knew it, too, like predators in the wild who knew they could eat anyone and anything, even each other if they wanted. Apparently, they were willing to cooperate now, to kill the demons living on top of their den.

“Whatever you do,” Mia said, “don’t use your fire breath.”

Vin growled back at her. He probably wasn’t in any condition to go Godzilla on the tunnel, but then again, he’d used his breath when Mia had freed him, and he’d only had Zel’s heart for food. Better to not risk it.

A goort pushed past Julisa, and another pushed past Livian on opposite walls of the tunnel, but that was only the beginning. The wall of demons broke, and the tetrads stepped back as the tide of creatures threw themselves into the cavern. They didn’t make a break for the exit. Their eyes were on the smaller demons, and Mia.

Romakus jumped into the center of the huge cavern, straight at Vinicius, and with a flap of his wings, he leapt up. He got high, high enough his sword reached the ceiling and killed a fallo spider, before he crashed down, spun, and brought the sword down on a goort that tried to get around Vin.

“Show off,” Julisa said. She and Livian stayed at the tunnel entrance, plugging it as best they could and killing what few creatures were still coming up the tunnel, but the majority had pushed past, and now the cavern was chaos. Yeap, coming down here was a huge mistake.

Why didn’t things just go smooth?

Yulia came up to Mia and stood with her, sharing a quick grin, and patted her on the shoulder as she helped nudge Mia to the cavern exit.

“You didn’t have to come with Vinicius.”

“I know, but—” Mia squeaked and jumped back as a fallo spider dropped from the ceiling. It leapt at her, and Yulia pounced it, knocking it to the ground. But they landed oddly, rolled, and the spider and its sharp legs landed on top.

It didn’t get to use them. A very human-like red person jumped past Mia, and cleaved the spider in half at the abdomen with a far more reasonably sized sword than Romakus’s.

“What’re you doing here?” Faust asked.

“I uh... thought maybe Vinicius could help.”

Vinicius was definitely helping, but only when a hellbeast came at him. Even wounded and recovering, he was strong enough it probably should have been him at the front, ripping and tearing.

Instead, he looked back at the four incubi now standing around Mia, and growled like a dog getting possessive of their bone. In any other context, it might have been kinda sexy, but right now, it just made her want to smack him.

The incubi, each armed with a sword, got to work. They didn't have the claws of the other demons, and sure, they weren't as strong, but they were good with those swords, swinging fluidly and cleaving fallo spiders at a safe distance from their many sharp feet. It wasn't so easy with the goorts though, too big, skin too thick, and the incubi avoided them entirely. Vinicius took care of them.

Mia backed up all the way to the cavern entrance, and watched. Now that the incubi were here, the demons had the advantage, their blades taking down hellbeasts more quickly than the others did, save for Romakus. He was on the same page as the incubi, happy to use his sword to make the violence quick and brutally efficient. He was good. He knew it, too, and enjoyed showing off. More than once, he threw Mia a wink and grin, and she glared at him. It wasn't good that she kinda liked it.

Things settled down eventually. Dead spiders with blade feet, dead giant horses with ram horns, and dead wolf lions with black spikes littered the cavern. In the end, it was a good thing Mia had come, or at least her bodyguard. Vinicius killed almost a dozen creatures by the time the slaughter was over, in particular some very large goorts that'd wrestled themselves past Julisa and Livian. If he hadn't been injured, he could have torched the tunnel, or gone physical, berserk, and slaughtered hundreds of the creatures with his claws and teeth. An injured child of Belial was still useful.

"Thanks for the help," Romakus said, panting and chuckling as he hooked his sword on his back.

"What happened?" Mia asked, gesturing around at the bodies. "Why'd the hellbeasts attack?"

"They get uppity sometimes." The tetrad walked their way, and didn't so much as try to sidestep any of the corpses, content to walk on them. Spiders went crunch under his feet. "The tunnels go deep, and there are spawning rooms down there." He shrugged and stopped in front of Vin. Mia joined her bodyguard. "My crew hasn't been here long. We don't like to hang around in any place and wear out our welcome, for obvious reasons when most spires want us dead. I'm guessing our presence stirred up the hellbeasts."

"Maybe," Gallius said, standing beside his buddy Faustinus. "Maybe it was the unmarked girl who's walking around wearing a literal angel rune?"

It was common knowledge now that angel clothes — and armor — were actually summoned by runes. Not that demons could do anything with that knowledge; the only reason Yosepha felt comfortable with the others learning that.

“I’ve killed a wurm with her nearby,” Vin said. “It didn’t react to her anymore than it did to me.”

“Is that so?” Romakus said, and he stepped around Vin so he could squat in front of Mia. “How about it? Anything special about you, princess? Feel anything weird going on in there?” With a raised claw, he pointed at her head. Vin flexed, ready to pounce, but thankfully did not.

“What do you think I am? Some sort of... psychic... voodoo... shaman... witch?”

Julisa and Livian joined them, laughing as they kicked aside some corpses. Cruel.

“If it’s not about you,” Faust said, “then we should consider leaving this mountain sooner than planned. Unless we want to do this dance every so often?”

“Maybe we do,” Romakus said. He stood up straight and looked at the crowd of demons. “Sound off!”

Every demon, even the wounded ones, listed off their name in classic military fashion, starting from where the tetrad pointed, and then in clockwise order. It wasn’t the first time they’d done this.

“All accounted for,” Romakus said. “No losses. Ain’t that lucky?”

Faust shook his head. “Luck had nothing to do with it, boss.”

“True. We’re pretty awesome.” Nodding, Romakus flared and flourished his wings a few times, hooked them, and gestured back to the cavern entrance behind Mia. “Alright, let’s go back.”

“Go back?” Mia asked. “But... if there’s a nest down there, shouldn’t someone deal with it?”

“Nests can’t be destroyed. They regrow quickly. And the tunnels below Death’s Grip are a maze.”

Mia groaned and hugged herself. “I know. I learned firsthand.”

“The tunnels beneath this particular mountain are probably deeper and more problematic than most. Not really worth clearing out unless we were setting up a permanent base here. And part of the reason the Damall have existed for so long is that we don’t do that. Keep moving, keep living.” He shrugged and stepped around Mia. “We’ve got bigger things to worry about.”

“But...” But a quiet little sensation in her told her to check it out. The fingers inside her, forever quietly plucking the strings that moved through her as she moved, continued to play their song, so quiet only she could hear them at the moment. But there was something else, too, something else pulling at her attention.

Mia stayed where she was, did her best to ignore the hundred or so dead hellbeasts that littered the ground, and stared past them toward the cavern exit, where the beasts had come from. It was like a



compass in the corner of her eye pointing toward the tunnel, a teeny tiny thing that was easily ignorable, but it was there. Why ignore it?

“Can I... go down there?” she asked.

Romakus traded looks with the other tetrads as he turned around to face her again.

“I’ve explored a lot of those tunnels,” Yulia said. “Me and my friend.” With a smooth motion, the brute knelt down, and Yulia climbed up his arm to perch on his back and shoulder. “You’re not gonna escape the Damall in those tunnels.”

“I’m not looking to escape! I still wanna talk to Yosepha again, or Galon. I still... might need the Damall’s help, and...” Mia grumbled, stepped around some corpses toward where the hellbeasts had come from, and thanked God again the angel rune gave her sandals. “I just wanna go check out the nests. Can I do that?”

Romakus raised a brow, and looked between his two tetrads. Julisa and Livian were just as confused.

“I’ll stick with her,” Faust said.

“Yeah, sure, we all will,” Gallius said, and he gestured to the other two incubi.

Romakus gestured to Julisa. “Go with them?”

“Oh yes, I think I will.” The four-armed mini-Vin stepped up to the big guy, and grinned up at him as she settled in beside him. “Hold hands?”

Vin rumbled down at her, and followed Mia.

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“Romakus is... hard to predict,” Mia said. “I’m kind of surprised he’s letting me come down here.” She walked with Faust on her left, Gallius on her right, and the other two incubi behind her, Locutus and Oudoceus. Vin and Julisa walked in front, ready to kill anything that attacked. Nothing did.

“Romakus is?” Faust asked. “You’re the one going on a random trip into the tunnels. The chance we find a soul or demon to eat down here is borderline none.”

“Well, I mean, I am human. Probably. I could eat a hellbeast heart, right? For the essence?”

“There was a whole cavern of dead hellbeasts you could have eaten.”

“Ah, yeah.” She winced as she looked down. “I just... wanted to explore a bit.”

“It’s probably safe,” Gallius said. “That’s why he let you come down here. Hellbeasts throw themselves into swarms like that pretty hard. Their numbers are low now. And now that morning twilight’s past, any remaining beasts are probably in passive mode.”

“Does anyone actually know,” Mia said, gesturing ahead to the dark tunnel before them, “why hellbeasts usually hunt at twilight hours?”

“We do not,” Julisa said. “Did you not ask the angel? You two were sharing secrets.”

Mia glared up at the huge demoness and did her best angry face. All that got from Julisa was a hearty chuckle.

“Yosepha helped me with this rune thing, but she wasn’t exactly dumping secrets on me.”

“Can you use their armor and weapons yet?” Gallius asked.

“I—hey, I’m not telling you shit!”

The incubus grinned. “Can’t blame a demon for trying.”

“Yes I can.” She flicked his shoulder, hard as her little finger could. She’d never have done that with a normal demon, way too dangerous, but incubi were human enough her guard was coming down. Probably not a good thing, but it happened anyway.

His tail swayed faster, and both he and Faust licked their smiles.

“The Damall have orders to keep you alive,” Faust said. “And honestly, we’ve been meaning to check out these tunnels more, anyway. Yulia’s exploring wasn’t exactly thorough.”

“You think something could be down here?” Mia asked.

“Probably just beast nests, but you never know. Sometimes you find artifacts from the First War, if you go deep enough.”

Mia perked up. “Really?”

“Yes. Everyone knows Lucifer and the Old Ones waged war against Heaven, millions of years ago. Not everyone knows the Old Ones were up to their own stuff in their respective provinces.”

“You’ve been to the other provinces?”

Faust shook his head. “Just across the Grave Valley from the Scar.”

“From? You came from the Scar?”

“Gallius and me.” He gestured to his fellow incubus. “We were born there.”

“Oh, tell me! Tell me about stuff!”

The incubi laughed and recanted a tale as they walked. The tunnel was a single path for now, spiraling downward, and following it was easy enough. While they walked, Gallius and Faustinus told Mia about the Scar and the Grave Valley. The Scar was as Vin said it was, a giant canyon where succubi and incubi had more power than other provinces. Sex was even more common, naturally, and direct brutality less so. Apparently they even had fashion, and devoted a lot of time to harvesting fallo silk and beram skin; beram apparently being some kind of hellbeast bird. The Scar used scrying pools for music. And instead of using strength to settle arguments, demons lied, cheated, stole, and manipulated each other.

The Scar sounded a lot like Earth.

They had little to say about the Grave Valley. It was full of graves, and it was dangerous. The ruler of the valley, Azailia, was apparently close friends with Zel. Was. If she found out about what Mia did, and that David was involved, it'd make his journey through the province a million times worse.

The gang came to a fork in the tunnel. Everyone paused and listened, and while they could hear the screams of remnants, that was all. No roars, no clicks, no neighs, no skittering or hoof stomping.

Shrugging, Julisa took a step toward one of the tunnels.

“Um.” Mia hopped ahead a bit and pointed down the other tunnel. “Can we go this way?”

“Why?” the tetrad asked.

“I... um... feel something?”

Everyone raised a brow, except Vin. He was probably used to her weird quirks by now.

“I say we go where the unmarked suggests,” Faust said.

Julisa made the tiniest snarl. She didn't like being challenged.

“Why?”

“Because she's unmarked? Kinda breaking the rules Heaven and Hell have been following since the beginning? I, for one, am dying to see what happens to the unmarked, to her and others, too.” Faust made a small salute. “I am in the ‘mindlessly follow the unmarked into crazy situations’ camp.”

Mia beamed. Faust was fun. Fun was dangerous, a great way to get someone to lower their guard. Probably a manipulation tactic he picked up in the Scar, but still, she liked it, and him.

The three other incubi all nodded and stepped around Faust. Four men, her new little army.

Julisa rolled her eyes, but she shifted from annoyed to amused in a few seconds, probably because of how Faust and the others were all smiling and nodding to each other like they'd just had a satisfying team meeting. They were cute, even to the tetrad.

“Alright,” she said, and headed down the path Mia pointed to.

It happened a few times, more forks, and some caverns they found were utterly horrific. Remnants were growing, hundreds of them, dangling from the ceiling and tearing at the rock that held them as much as each other. Some were trapped in a big funnel-shaped pit on the ground, so wide it covered the entire cavern floor and they had to go around it. Some covered the walls so densely, they looked like a waterfall of flesh.

The demons were right, though. There were places where hellbeasts probably hung out, signs of claw marks, places where hooves ground the stone smooth and horns did the same against some bloodgrip vines; apparently goorts did that, according to Gallius.

Julisa held up a hand and took a deep breath.

“I smell... beasts,” she said.

Vinicius took a deeper breath before nodding.

“Nests.”

Stunned, Julisa looked at the colossus beside her.

“You can smell the difference?”

“I can.”

The tetrad grinned up at him and gestured for him to lead the way. Probably so she could stare at his ass. Whatever the reason, Vin took lead. Julisa stayed close. Mia and the incubi stayed in the back, and Mia did her best to ignore the increasingly fucked up remnants decor.

Sighing, Mia covered her ears as they walked past the dying souls. Gallius spared her a quick glance before taking out his sword and ending the suffering of the closer remnants. She thanked him silently, he acknowledged silently, and he and the other incubi all used their swords to kill remnants that had the worst of it. A little empathy, from demons? She smiled.

“You said you feel something down here?” Faust asked. “We’re still on the path to it?”

“I think so, yeah.”

“Romakus probably guessed that. Otherwise, he’d have said no to this whole trip, I think. He wants to know what’s unique about you as much as Yosepha does.”

“Fuck. I should have guessed that. Everyone just wants to use me, or kill me.”

The incubus smiled. “Of course.”

“And—” She shut up as they round the next curve of the tunnel.

Holes in the walls. Red walls.

Vinicius grumbled as he continued his slow walk, and didn’t bother stopping to analyze the wall of flesh.

“W-Wait,” Mia said. “This is... it.”

“What is?” Faust asked, putting away his sword.

“The feeling I was getting. Just a tiny... super very tiny feeling, but it’s this...” She reached out and touched the wall of flesh. “This whole area. Do you guys feel anything?”

“No,” Gallius, Oudoceus, and Locutus said. Faust shrugged.

“It’s a nest,” Julisa said. “Hell’s flesh where she births hellbeasts.”

Mia gulped and looked up at the wall of flesh. She reached out, touched it, and shivered. Warm. Alive. She walked along its length, and the further she moved down the tunnel, the more the flesh growth covered the floor and ceiling. Muscle without skin. It pulsed with life.

Eventually, the tunnel opened up into a wide cavern, all coated in flesh. Maybe coated wasn’t the right word? More like, the tunnel had connected to something made of flesh, a piece of Hell, like an organ with an interior that could be walked around in. There were plenty of holes in the walls, just like the holes in the spire. No, not exactly the same. These were closer together, so anyone with tryphobia would not like the room.

There were eggs, dozens of them. But unlike the eggs in the spire, all these were mostly of the same size. Big, leathery eggs, black with some red blemishes on them. Moist. They were grouped in clusters, someone having used the grooves in the muscle floor to keep them together, like a lizard might have with a mound of dirt. The idea of goorts or hellhounds pushing around eggs so they could hatch together made the slaughter that’d happened only a couple hours earlier really fucking sad.

“They’re all the same size,” Mia said.

“Of course,” Julisa said, “they’re of the same species. This isn’t a spire. Hellbeasts of different species don’t usually get along, so their nests usually only birth one species.”

Julisa marched up to one cluster, and crushed its contents, each egg, without hesitation.

“H-Hey! What’re you doing?”

“What do you think? Hellbeasts are a menace. Without them stealing our kills, there would be more souls for demons.”

Gallius stepped closer. “And more remnants to deal with. And more Cainites. I hate hellbeasts as much as the next demon, but they serve a purpose.”

Julisa didn’t look convinced. She marched over to another nest, and did the same, crushing the foot-tall eggs under her talons. Mia looked away. There were weird fetus-like shapes in the remains of the eggs, and some twitched as they died without the egg to protect and provide for them. And much as Mia wanted to look away, she couldn’t. They were hellhounds.

Movement yanked Mia’s attention to the side, and she jumped back with a squeak. Everyone else froze as one of the larger holes on the wall pulsed, shook, and squeezed out another egg. It fell a foot onto the muscle ground, and sat there, waiting to be moved to join another cluster. It was a big one. Bigger than the other ones.

And the little compass in the corner of Mia’s eye nudged her toward it. Or, not it, but the wall that’d birthed it.

The flesh wall had reacted to her?

Mia looked away from Julisa and the cruel woman’s merciless slaughter of the unborn cannam, and approached the freshly birthed egg. She squatted in front of it and touched it.

Something inside shifted, and settled.

“Don’t... Don’t kill this one.”