

~~David~~

The music pulled him into its embrace, a flowing river of vibration. He was in the lava and amber veins. He was in the blackstone and the bloodstained rock. He was in the statues that grew from the ground, the burning bushes, the bloodgrip, even the nests that birthed hellbeasts. He could feel them, hear them, hidden in the depths of the land, tiny echoes in the distance he could not hope to touch, not from here.

But the Hell around him, the cavern and the temple, that he could touch. That he could play the music for.

He swung his arm down, and a colossal spike of blackstone shot out from the high ceiling, straight down for the angel's head. But she was fast, and as much as she screamed fury at him, she paid enough attention to dodge the spike. It crashed into the ground, a foot wide, and at that length the blackstone cracked and crumbled with its own brittleness. That was fine. Hell had plenty more.

“What have you done!?” she screamed. David barely heard her. The vibration of the strings pulsed through him, like he'd put his ear up to the engine of a semi truck, and the hefty vibrations blocked out everything.

Play for me.

Use me.

Mold me.

I will dance for you.

The music sang to him. The fingers inside him played the strings, but something else played them too, mirroring his actions and hitting the strings a million times harder than he ever could. And now, each time he plucked the strings, they did more than create vibration. They changed things.

Glaring at the angel, he swung a hand out to the side. Another spike erupted from the cavern wall, horizontally this time, and it spiraled as it streaked across the open air. Again the angel dodged, but the spiraling rock and its terrible barbs hit her side, and she spun out of control.

David swung a hand up and summoned another. He crafted it, molded it the same way he did auras. Be sharp. Be covered in barbs. Bring agony. But the angel was fast, and she brought her shield down in front of her. The blackstone could not penetrate the strange metal of the shield and its mirror surface, and the tip shattered. The impact was powerful, though, and it threw the angel to the side.

Moriah gained control, aimed her sword at David, and her wings glowed with a radiant gold. She was going to shoot a beam of holy light at him, as she probably had several days before.

David aimed two hands down, and waited.

“Die, abomination!” she screamed. Like Shaul, she liked the sound of her own voice.

Her sword glowed, and David swung his hands upward. He didn’t get to see the beam, only hear and feel it, as it crashed against the wall of blackstone David summoned. A massive wall, thick, wide enough to protect him and the girls who all now stood near him. They squealed, shrieked, and covered their heads and horns as the beam of light shook the cavern, and arcs of gold shot up and around the wall before dispersing. Even Acelina had reached them, and she kept her enormous form behind the wall as best she could.

His wall began to crumble.

David reached upward and pulled down. With deafening thunder, the cavern ceiling cracked, a mighty split to join the others, and rock and stone fell upon the angel’s position. Summoning the hard blackstone was easier than cracking the entire colossal cavern, but he couldn’t see her from behind his wall to aim a spike, and he wouldn’t lower the barrier while the girls hid behind it. Easier to bring the cavern right down on her.

The beam stopped, and the angel screamed as something went crunch. The clang of rock banging on metal followed, and the angel’s scream continued, pain and rage echoing off the walls. In another life, the sound would have made David vomit. Just ten minutes ago, the sound would have made him want to. Now, all he could feel was the rolling waves of the vibrations of something he’d latched onto, guiding him, steering him into the flowing waters.

He put his hands together and pulled them apart, ripping the wall he’d created in half so it fell away as two pillars, before crumbling into rock and pebble. Most of the rocks that’d fallen had missed his target, but the angel hadn’t been able to dodge all several hundred of them. Clenching his jaw, he stepped between the two mounds and approached the angel, her damaged armor, her ripped wing, and the blood she leaked onto the Cainite corpses she lay upon.

“Monster,” Moriah screamed up at him. “Monster! Abomination! Shaul was right. Azoryev was right! You should all die!”

Azoryev. One of the Heavenly Islands. It had sent her, and the madman Shaul? Did another angel of Azoryev kill the unmarked in his dream?

Cruel. Heartless.

David glared down at the angel, raised a hand, and—

A click sound stopped him.

He looked back. Daoka sat there, and Jes and Acelina both wrapped her waist with leather they'd ripped from the dead. Acelina was unreadable, but Jes was desperate, eyes locked on her lover, tears on her cheeks. Caera stood between the mounds of rubble David had created, and the Las ran around in a panic, literally, arms up and tiny waves flapping as they squealed.

But it was Daoka, eyeless gaze aimed at David, softly clicking at him, that cut through the deep waves of vibration that flowed through his skull.

He let go. Like he'd been holding onto the fin of a giant whale speeding through the ocean, he let go, and the wall of still water crashed into him. He fell back on his ass. The sound vanished. The vibrations died to almost nothing until again all he could feel was the gentle strings that flowed through him as usual.

The angel stared at him, and he stared back. The power was gone, and his thoughts bubbled to the surface again. Holy shit, he could think again.

Holy shit, what happened?

"I'm... not... your enemy," he said. "Why are you attacking us?"

"Not my enemy!? You killed Shaul! Tzipporah!"

"In self defense!" He forced himself to his feet and stumbled back away from the angel. "I don't want to hurt anyone! Why are you attacking us? Me!?"

She paused, as if the very act of talking to him defied her reality, as if unmarked were obviously not capable of a conversation, and yet here he was trying to have one. But he'd killed her friends. Rage replaced her surprise.

"The unmarked must die. The council has decreed it!"

"Why!?"

The angel slammed her sword down against the ground, its tip sank a couple inches into the bloodied rock, and she rested on it as she aimed her ruby eyes as if she could incinerate him with a glare. She pushed out her damaged wing and fought to straighten it. Considering all the enormous, broken rocks that surrounded her and the dozen large dents in her armor, several boulders had hit her, big enough to kill a demon. That armor was strong.

She didn't answer.

"I don't want to hurt anyone," David said. "I'm... just trying to help."

"Help? An abomination would—"

"I am not an abomination! And that other unmarked with all these Cainites under his thumb? I killed him! Not Shaul!" He swung his arm around and pointed it at her. She flinched, expecting a spike up the gut, but whatever weird thing that'd let him control the environment was gone. Not that it mattered. He hadn't tried to summon another spike, anyway.

Daoka clicked a few more times, earning some growls from Jes.

"Don't listen to Dao," Jes said. "Kill the bitch."

Dao shook her head and gestured to the two dead angels. Bits of the woman rapholem Tzipporah were everywhere, ripped to shreds, some pieces of her insides still on the broken barbs of the first spike David had summoned. Her armor, giant shield, and long spear were gone, poofed out of existence. The male mikalim Shaul still sat on the other spike, dead, crotch and lower abdomen split open, legs dangling and cooking in the lava that continued to leak out of his sizzling guts. His upper half wasn't much better, with chunks of flesh melting off as more lava trickled up into his insides.

He looked worse off than a remnant.

David looked back at Dao, and she continued to look at him with her eyeless gaze, mouth trembling, blood flowing down her stomach and legs. The sword had gone through her. She was going to die if they didn't do something now.

"Just... get out of here," he said.

"What?" Jes, Acelina, Caera, and the angel said.

David gestured up at one of the high tunnel exits. "I don't want Heaven as an enemy! And I don't want to hurt anyone I don't have to! I'm just trying to... to help." Fuck. How to explain this without telling the angel what his plans were? "I don't know about the other unmarked, but I'm not like that Greg guy, okay? I just want to help. So, please, just go."

"David!" Caera prowled over to them, limping with every step. "She tried to kill us. Tried to kill you! She took my eye!"

David winced. "Can you... regrow an eye?"

“Only if the wound was minor.” She aimed her ruined eye at him. It was not minor. Moriah had cut the tregeera across the face, a line that ran from the top of her forehead, down her eye, and down her cheek. He could almost see the bone past the blood. It’d make for a big scar, and a lifetime problem.

Daoka clicked louder, and gestured to the David and Caera, but her arm fell, some blood leaked from between her lips, and her head lulled to the side. Still alive, breathing, but fading fast.

“Can you help Daoka?” he asked the angel.

Moriah snarled up at him and again tried to flap her damaged wing.

“I am no gabriem. It is not in my power.”

So gabriem had the power to heal. Good to know.

“Then get out of here before I change my mind.” Before she realized he couldn’t do what he’d been doing five minutes ago. How he did that was a mystery that could wait until Daoka wasn’t fucking bleeding to death.

“You cannot be serious!?” Acelina yelled, but she stayed with Jes, patching Daoka up as best they could. But the leather bandages did little.

“I am serious!” He gestured back at the angel. “Get out of here!”

The angel stared at him, and then at the tiger she’d permanently maimed. Caera was two seconds away from jumping the angel and ripping her throat out, but she looked up at David with her one eye, growled, and slowly took a step back.

He’d beg for her forgiveness later, but Daoka was right. He had to let her go. If all that happened here was three dead angels, that’d lead to more angels hunting them down, a lot more. Maybe they thought all the unmarked were horrible, like this Greg person? Maybe if they realized not all of them were, they’d stop trying to kill him?

Or she’d just report his location to her superiors immediately, and come back with an army. Hopefully, David and the girls would be out of here by then. All eight of them.

All eight.

“I’m not leaving without the bodies of my friends. I will not let you devour their hearts!”

David glared at the angel as he gestured to the bodies. The only thing left of the rapholem were chunks of gore, and her shredded torso. Even her heart was mincemeat. The other angel was a roasting marshmallow on a stick someone had stuck too close to the fire.

“They have no hearts left to devour,” Caera said, and she clawed at the ground with a set of claws. “Get out of here before I kill you, anyway.”

The angel looked at the bodies of her dead comrades. From this close, David could see through her helmet’s t-slit opening, and tears trickled down her dark skin. She set her ruby eyes back on him, a host of emotions screaming so loudly across her face it almost bowled him over. Hate, rage, mourning, disbelief, it all punched him in the gut, and he looked down as he stepped away.

That was her cue. She snapped out her damaged wing hard, and she bit down a yell as the limb fought against her. But it was straight now, and she flapped both wings hard, launched herself into the air, and disappeared into a tunnel

Leaving nothing but silence.

David spun around and ran to Daoka, but the Las were already on it. Each one came up to Daoka with a freshly farmed Cainite heart, handed them to her, and got to work gathering more.

“Strange,” Acelina said, her eyeless gaze following the two imps and two gremlas. He didn’t ask.

He got down on his knees beside Dao. The satyr lay on her back, head on Jeskura’s lap, and the gargoyle stroked her lover’s head between her four ram horns as she sniffed.

“You almost died,” Jes said.

Dao smiled up at her and clicked twice.

“Don’t say that! You almost died!” Jes lifted a hand, like she was ready to punch Dao or something, but no one bothered to stop her. With a weak sigh and shoulder tremble, she put her hand back down on Dao’s shoulder, and closed her eyes.

Acelina cut the farmed hearts into pieces with her claws and slipped them into Dao’s mouth. Dao tried to use her own hands, but got them a few inches off the ground before giving up. Blood was everywhere, and a lot of it was hers.

“I’m sorry,” David said. “I’m... so sorry, I—”

Jes snapped out her closer wing and hit him across the face with the blunt side of its thumb claw. She was not gentle.

“Don’t fucking apologize! Dao saved your life because she likes you, damn it. Don’t fucking... apologize.”

“I...” He gulped down the words and forced himself to look at Dao’s stomach. She wore armor that covered plenty of her body, even a chunk across her lower stomach, but there was no way to strap chunks of meera metal to the skin in a way that’d cover everything. The sword had entered above the stomach guard, just below her sternum, and as if to announce its deadly damage, Dao coughed, and blood splattered over her lips.

“She’ll... I think she’ll live,” Caera said, but her voice was heavy. “I hope. We got plenty of hearts here to eat. I’ve seen demons survive chest wounds like this, if they were fed immediately.” Growling loud enough everyone looked at her, Caera backed up and paced left and right beside the group. “What we don’t have, is time. Dao will take at least a week to heal from this enough to move on her own, maybe more because who the fuck knows how much damage an angel blade does. That angel you let go is going to come back with reinforcements in less time than that.”

David didn’t look back at Caera, eyes locked on Dao and the leather straps wrapped tight around her mid section, failing to keep her blood inside her. She did her best to swallow down the pieces of heart Acelina gave her, but she coughed, turning the process into a chore and covering her lips and chin in crimson. But she tried again, and got another piece down.

“That angel, she might not get reinforcements,” David said.

“Yes, she will!” Caera came up behind David and yanked on his shoulder, turning him around hard enough he had to catch his weight on his palms. “She’s an angel, David! She thinks demons are less than trash, and apparently she and all the other angels have been told that all unmarked need to die!” She slammed her thick tail down, and half yelled half meowed in pain. It bled. “Why didn’t you kill her!?”

“Because Dao didn’t want me to! Because I didn’t want to! I didn’t even want to kill the other two!”

“Then what the fuck happened? You... You summoned blackstone! You reached out and ripped the ceiling open. You summoned amber! No one can do that, David. No one can do that... except Hell herself.”

Everyone grew silent again, even the Las, chattering coming to a quick stop as they dumped another four hearts onto Acelina’s lap. They stared at him, big eyes wide with wonder.

“David... did that?” Latia asked, and she came close enough she put a hand on his shoulder. Squatting beside him on her tiny hooves, she rubbed her horns into his arm before looking up at him again, confused.

“I... don’t know what happened,” he said. “I don’t know how to explain—”

Acelina snorted. “Try.”

He took a deep breath and forced himself back to his feet. Okay, try to understand. What happened? What the fuck happened? His memory of it was a blur, like trying to see through a drinking glass.

“It... wasn’t any rune,” he said. “I touched Greg, and it made the runes click for how to use the anvil to make imbued weapons. Not that that’s any use now, with the amber vein the anvil was tapped into destroyed.”

“Can’t make another?” Lasca asked. “David special! Controls Hell!”

He winced. “I don’t think I can. Normally, I can feel... strings, moving through me, like musical instrument strings. The strings are everywhere, and as I move around, I can feel them inside me, moving as I move. And there’s this part of me, these... fingers, I guess, inside my soul that let me play them. They’re what let me use runes, too. And...” He gestured back to Dao. “I saw Dao get hurt, and I... I hit the strings, really, really hard.” The blurry memory sent a buzz up through him, like he stood on a subwoofer. “It... summoned something.”

“Summoned?” Caera asked.

“Yeah, summoned. I was... It was like I’d caught a ride on something, something else that exists in the... the... whatever it is the strings exist in. I latched onto it, and then it pulled me deep. The deeper I went, the less I could think. And... And whatever it was, it told me to... to... use it. And when I did, it helped me play the strings really, really loud. So loud they... changed Hell.” He looked at the two spikes he’d summoned that’d hit their targets, and swallowed down the need to puke. “I did it, but I don’t know how anymore. I can’t... feel that part of me anymore.”

“Unless you do what you did last time,” Caera said, “and... hit the strings really hard? Summon this thing again?”

“I guess? Maybe? I don’t know how I did it. It was... I felt... I don’t know.” That wasn’t true. He knew. He knew inside, he’d had an emotional breakdown in that moment, and had just let his emotions loose. Just like how his emotions affected the aura he created, and amplified it, the emotions he’d felt then had forced him to hit the strings so hard, his real fingers hurt. “I don’t think I could do it again, not easily, or at least, not right now. I need to figure this out.”

Caera’s one eye cut him into pieces.



“Yeah, well, you figure it out. I’m going to check out the temple.” And before he could say anything, she ran off, literally, ignoring her wounds and pouncing toward the half crumbled temple.

David stared after her before looking at the rest of them, Daoka in particular. The Las made room for him, and he knelt down beside her again, wincing for a whole new host of reasons.

“What happened?” he asked Jes and Acelina. “I was in the temple, and Greg turned out to be a fucking sociopath with delusions of grandeur. He was going to sacrifice me to see what kind of imbued weapon I could make. I kept expecting you girls to show up when it seemed like all the Cainites were in the temple, and then... that angel showed up.” He gestured to the burning corpse, still stuck on a spike. The armor and weapons were gone, and the wings, and clothes. It barely looked like a corpse anymore. Even the bones were melting and burning away.

The Las and Acelina all looked to Jes, but Jes kept her eyes on Dao, still cradling the riiva’s head on her lap.

“We were about to,” Acelina said. “But, as it turns out, the angels had been following us. Or perhaps they had found their own Cainites, and had somehow learned of this Greg and his congregation. They approached from a different tunnel, and were waiting, as well. When you called for help, they attacked.” Acelina sighed and gently caressed Dao’s cheek with the blunt side of a claw. “We joined when Shaul entered the temple, realizing we had no choice. Caera went first, and she dashed for the temple when...” Acelina dragged a claw down the side of her face. “That woman you let go stopped her, and took her eye.”

Her left eye. David covered his left eye with a palm, looked down, and bit down the urge to scream. Now wasn’t the time to scream or cry or any of that shit. He was fine. The girls were not.

“Dao,” he said, and he patted his owner on the shoulder gently. “Are you... gonna be okay? I can stay here, if you want, and—”

Dao clicked twice, chirped once, and smiled up at him.

“Go after Caera,” Jes said. “There’s nothing you can do here. And there might still be some Cainites in the temple. Better go help Caera take them out, or before she gets herself killed.”

“I... don’t know if—”

“We protect!” Lasca said, and she grabbed her fellow impa Laara. The mini-gargoyles helped David back to his feet. “Cainites all dead, for sure. But we protect.”

“All dead.” Laara said, and she patted Daoka on the leg. “Daoka strong! Killed many.”

“She is strong,” Jes said. “She’ll live.”

Acelina nodded and helped feed Daoka another heart. “She will be full, soon. And then tomorrow, we will see.”

Full. Demons could only eat so much resonance before they couldn’t absorb anymore, and a demon on a full belly was at their peak for healing. If Daoka couldn’t heal, she’d die, and...

He forced himself to look away, and walked to the temple, stepping over piles of corpses the Las had been moving and farming. The lava wasn’t a problem, thankfully, sticking to cracks in the ground the hellquakes had created, and never becoming anymore than a trickle. A trickle was more than enough to melt and burn Cainite bodies, though, and they had to avoid some fire.

David didn’t look at the girl he shredded, and carefully avoided looking at her severed head. Her wings were still there, fully intact, in two different parts of the cavern.

Back in the temple, bodies everywhere, Caera was nowhere to be seen. But the giant demon skull that’d once been the centerpiece of a display of demon skulls, was freshly destroyed. Renato avenged. Sort of.

“Caera?” he asked.

No answer, but a loud, annoyed growl eventually came out of one hallway. It was an enormous cathedral, with large archways that led into other halls, and Caera had followed one of them down. He went after her, but Lasca grabbed his hand.

“David? Where other unmarked?”

“Greg? He’s right... here...” What the fuck. Greg wasn’t there anymore. A skeleton was, with a destroyed skull, face crushed in, with the rock still beside it. It’d been coated in blood before, and now it wasn’t. Blood faded fast in Hell, but it usually lasted a few hours. Dead flesh lasted a couple days.

“Where?”

“The skeleton. That’s... That’s Greg.”

“He was a skeleton? You killed a skeleton?” Lasca stared up at him with her big eyes, one eyebrow raised.

“N-No, he was perfectly human like me when I killed him. I... what the fuck.”

Lasca shrugged. The mystery of why an unmarked would melt away a thousand times faster than a normal corpse didn't interest her. The fancy book on the giant pulpit did. She scaled it easily, threw it down to Laara, and Laara held it up to David.

"Book!" she said.

"Thanks. Um, can you hold on to it for me, Laara? I wanna talk to Caera first."

Laara saluted him, and slipped the leather-bound, dark book under her arm. The three of them tiptoed over the tiny bits of lava running down the cracks in the floor, and David stepped around the bodies; the Las just walked on them. It was a ridiculous mess, and blood dripped from the balcony above. From the ground floor, David couldn't see up there very well, but more than a few arms hung off the edge between sharp, pointy railing bars, and some legs, too.

The Cainites were dead. Mission successful. Kinda.

He stood in the archway and peeked down the stairs. Big archway, big stairs, meant for big demons, and he almost had to jump down each step until he reached the next room. Predictably, it was a big room full of cages, because of course it was. What use was the anvil if you didn't have fuel to feed the process?

The cages were empty, but they were big enough to house hundreds of humans, with black bars covered in spikes. The ceiling was high, more than big enough for a child of the Old Ones, like the chamber above, and more skull braziers dangled from it by thick black chains. They'd burn eternally, another quirk of Hell.

Caera stood by a cage, up on her hind legs so she could glare down at it from an eight-foot vantage point. With one hand out to hold on to it, she glared down at the blackstone floor. A huge crack cut along the room, and many of the cages had snapped from the tension. One crack along the wall leaked with lava, a trickle that oozed from where it'd been fed into the anvil.

David came up beside her and stood facing the cage, but the moment he opened his mouth, Caera got back on all fours, and walked off. Biting down the urge to say something, he looked back at the two impas, and Lasca and Laara both shrugged. Social dynamics for demons might have been simpler than it was for humans, but it wasn't an imp or grem's forte.

He followed and fell in beside the tiger demon as she found another hallway, and the two explored the various holes and crevices of the temple. It had rooms, big and full of cages, torture devices, and plenty of meera weapons and meera armor; leather straps to go with, too. She moved onto the next room.

“Caera,” he said at last. “Can... Can I see?”

“What?”

“The wound. Let me see.”

She turned her head around to glare at him, but she did it with her bad eye first, earning a growl as she realized she couldn't see him from that angle.

“I fucked up,” she said.

“No, you didn't.”

“Yes, I did. I made a mistake and lost an eye. Demons almost never regrow eyes unless they're very old, or maybe a spire ruler. That fucking angel, the angel you let go! She...” Every muscle in the tiger's body tensed, and David inched away from her as she clawed at the floor. It passed, and she sighed as she moved into the next hall. It was a big cathedral alright, full of rooms meant for giant demons to treat as bedrooms, with chains dangling from huge archways that'd make noise if anyone tried to sneak in. The thousands of attached skulls would knock on each other, like bells. And they did as Caera pushed them aside.

No one jumped them, or ambushed them, or so much as made a sound. The temple was empty.

“Acelina told me what happened, that the angels showed up. That you... tried to get to me, when Shaul flew into the cathedral.”

She grumbled and continued down the huge black hall. The Las were smart enough to follow from a distance, only poking their eyes and small horns around corners at a safe distance.

“You let her go.”

“I had to let her go.”

“Bullshit. You should have killed her. Now the angels will know about your new abilities!”

“If I killed her, there's no way Heaven would ever consider—”

“Consider what? You heard what those two angels told us weeks ago, that we had to keep our heads down. Now we know why. The angels have an order out to kill you, David! You should have killed her, and then we'd have more time to get you away!”

He froze. “That's what this is about? Getting me to safety?”

“Yes! That angel was good, David, really good.” Caera almost gestured to her ruined eye, but turned at the last second and kept it out of his vision. “I can't protect you from angels! If you hadn't...

done that stuff, with the spikes and amber, we'd all be dead. The Cainites barely gave them pause, and Jes and I are the only reason the angels didn't slaughter the rest of us, and that was only for a few minutes!"

A lightbulb clicked on over David's head. She'd biased walking closer to the wall with her bad eye, so he wouldn't see it.

"Caera... hold up."

"I'm looking for any hiding Cainites. Come—"

"Please, just hold up."

After a deep growl that sent cold shivers up through his spine, Caera stopped. David came around in front of her, and sure enough, she tilted her head slightly to the side. She was hiding her ruined eye.

He got down on a knee in front of her, set both hands on her jaw, and gently turned her to face him.

"Damn," he said. "That is rough."

She yanked her head away. "I knew—"

"Caera, come on." He took her jaw again. She was an eight-foot-tall demon — when standing on two legs — with a slightly cat-ish short snout, and some big teeth. Beautiful, badass, and very angry with him for being so insistent. If he wasn't careful, she might bite him; not bite him hard enough to remove a finger, but still.

Demon skin was tough, toughest where it was dark, and demon eyebrows were nearly solid black, a patch of skin that resembled an eyebrow. The fact the angel had cut clean through it like she'd wielded a magical scalpel was terrifying.

"It's ugly," she said.

David winced and shook his head. Mia would have been proud of him for figuring this out.

"You need to watch scrying pools more, if you think a scar is ugly. Guys love scars. Maybe not as much as girls do, but... Lot of guys out there who are into badass muscular women with scars, trust me."

"I lost an eye, David. This isn't a little makeup. I have a fucking gash across the face."

“Yeah sure an open wound is a bit nasty, but it’ll close in what, a day or two? And then you’ll have a sexy scar.” He gave her his best smile, leaned in, and kiss her. “I thought you were livid with me for letting the angel go because you wanted revenge.”

“Revenge? How petty do you think I am? Asshole.” She flicked him with a claw. Ow. “It was a fight. Hell, we tried to sneak attack them.”

He laughed, leaned in, and pressed his forehead against hers, and tilted his head to nudge it over her good eye.

“You really thought I’d think you were ugly because of a scar?”

“The... thought had crossed my mind.” Sighing, she returned his lean, rubbed her horns into his scalp, and kissed him, too. “I’m just so fucking angry. I lost to that angel. I didn’t get to help you. The angels killed most of the Cainites, not me. Daoka’s bleeding to death. I lost a fucking eye, and—”

He kissed her again, set his hands on her shoulders, and held onto some of her spikes for leverage so he could stay kneeling with her and keep kissing her. A month ago he didn’t know how to kiss to save his life, but he was getting better at it, and Caera purred as she nudged her nose into his.

“It might not have been what you wanted,” he said, “but the Cainites are dead.”

“Dead!” Lasca said, and she squealed as she joined them, Laara behind her. “Revenge! Imps and grems can live in tunnels again!”

“That’s true,” David said. “That’s... true.”

Laara came closer, book still snug under her arm, and she tilted her head as she looked up at him.

“David sad?”

“I... nevermind. Let’s finish checking this place out, then get back and check on Dao.”

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They checked every room. No Cainites. Big as the cathedral was, it was a simple layout, a giant chamber under the main chamber for prisoners, and a couple hallways that circled the two floors, each with dozens of attached rooms. Back in the main chamber, the stairways on the side only led up to a balcony that circled the inside, perfect for a congregation to listen to someone lecture from the pulpit.

Many of the corpses had been farmed for their hearts already, either by the gremlas Laria and Latia, or by Acelina. It was a veritable feast, one David did not look forward to partaking in, but he was hungry and it was only getting worse.

For now, though, it was time to properly inspect the anvil.

“It’s useless, now,” David said, gesturing to the amber vein that ran along the cracked floor. Bits of lava continued to leak from it down one side of the chamber, easily avoided, but holy crap, it made a stink as it burned corpses.

“How would it have worked?” Caera asked.

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

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

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

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

“That explains the cages,” Caera said. “Maybe we should have kept some Cainites alive.”

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

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

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

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

“Okay.” Done. Side quest complete. And all they’d lost was being hidden from angels, Caera’s eye, and maybe Daoka’s life.

He gulped down that thought, too. Don’t think about it. Don’t even consider it. He could freak out and have a meltdown if Daoka died, but not until then.

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

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

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

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

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

God, if you’re real, don’t take her.

“Is she going to make it?” he asked.

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

“We won’t know until tomorrow.”

“Then we wait,” Caera said. “That angel will probably return with reinforcements, but that’ll take days.”

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



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

“I’m sorry,” the tiger said.

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

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

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

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

“You doing okay, Dao?”

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

“Good. You’ll live through this.”

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

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

Dao clicked once.

“She’s right,” Jes said. “Everyone needs to eat.”

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

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

“Yeah?”

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

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

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

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

David tilted his head. “I thought they’d stick around here, in their mountain, after we left.”

“Do you want them to?”

“I... No, I don’t. They’ve been helpful, and they’re nice. I like them.”

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

“Yeah,” Jes said. “I kinda like them, too. Cute little fucks, and useful.” Caera handed her a heart, and she downed it quickly before again setting her hands on her lover’s shoulders, eyes never leaving her.

“They are useful,” Acelina said, “but how useful will they be in the Grave Valley?”

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

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

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

“I uh, didn’t actually see the fight, but I’m pretty sure you did.”

The Las all cheered.

“I wanted to ask,” he said, “about your plans.”

“Plans?” Lasca asked.

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

“We come?” Latia said. “We can come?”

“Yeah, you can come. We want you to come. You’ve proven yourselves more than useful to the group, and... we like you.” He kept his palms out. “We killed the Cainites. Your mountain and tunnels are safe... er. I completely understand if you want to stay here, but we’re also inviting you to come.”

The four ladies looked between each other before leaning in close and looking past him to Acelina. Caera was already on the way over, but it was the biggest demoness they were worried about.

“Zotiva can be scary,” Laara said. “She wants us?”

Caera chuckled as she sat beside David. A weak chuckle, but better than nothing.

“Don’t mind Acelina. She wants you to come, too. She’s just a mean bitch.”

The four ladies all looked to the giant demoness, who was sitting with Daoka and monitoring her, before they looked back at David and Caera with uncertain eyes.

“Mean,” Lasca said.

“Beautiful,” Laara said, nodding.

“Mean and beautiful,” Laria said.

“Beautiful and a big meanie,” Latia said.

David laughed. The little ladies somehow turned every conversation into a fun game. He’d really hate it if they left.

“She won’t bother you. And we’re dropping her off at the Grave Valley spire, next on the list of places we’re going to.”

“Never been to Grave Valley,” Lasca said. “Dangerous?”

“Very,” Caera said.

Latia came in close and pressed her bloodied body up against David’s side, complete with big, wondrous eyes full of determination.

“Las protect!”

“Las protect!” the other girls said, and they swarmed him, surrounded him, and each hugged him. They were short, four feet tall, but that wasn’t so short he wasn’t engulfed, and they giggled as they rubbed their foreheads and the blunt side of their horns into his shoulders.

“I think David will be the one protecting us,” Caera said, standing up so she towered over them, “if he can figure out how to do what he did here today.” She pulled the Las off him, but they giggled and ran back to hug him again.

“David protect us!” Laria said. “We princesses! He protect!”

The other three Las all gasped, let go of David, and immediately put their heads together in a hustle. Their voices blended.

“David protect us?”

“Unmarked protect us!”

“Unmarked is cute.”

“Unmarked has aura! And special powers!”

“And giant cock.”

“Cock!”

“Sex, and protection!”

“And food.”

“Food!”

“But why he protect?”

“We are princesses. We are hot.”

“Sexy.”

“Beautiful.”

“Trade sex for protection? Like on surface?”

“Yes, good plan.”

“Like that plan.”

Caera rolled her eyes and chuckled, and David did, too. They were just too damn cute. And sexy, in that strange ‘tiny demon that’ll potentially bite off your nose’ kinda way.

They faced him, and Lasca stepped forward from the group, gaze filled with the determination of a leader.

“David protect us! In trade, David can fuck us. All the time! Whenever!”

“Whenever!” the other three said.

Trading protection for sex was one very fucked up idea, except it was obvious the Las were being silly and really just wanted to have as much sex as they could. Demons were horny, twenty-four-seven, and the imps and grems were just as bad as other demons, if not worse.

“It’ll be dangerous,” he said. “I could die. You could die.”

The little ladies shook their heads and gave him the same determined expression of their leader.

“We live! Lived Cainites. Live across Hell!” Lasca said. “And maybe find other imps and grems? More friends!”

“More cocks and pussies!” Laara said, and she fluttered her wings.

“I... hadn’t thought of that.” That was an image, for sure, of dozens of pairs of wings and horns and boobs all struggling to get a turn on his body. Or, on Acelina’s body, considering how much the Las had liked her, too. An army of horny little critters.

He laughed.

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~~Unknown~~

A man, on his back in a black temple, staring up at another man. The other man was small, clean shaven, with freckles and shaggy red hair. He held a rock in his hands, and he brought it down on the first man’s face, again and again until there was nothing left. He didn’t have a number.

The first man died.

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~~Day 42~~

~~Mia~~

She sat up with a snap and grabbed the closest thing she could find. A big egg, not so moist anymore, warm and leathery, and absolutely useless if she wanted to block a man from bashing her head in with a rock.

A man? That'd been... David!

"Vin!" She jumped up, ran over to her bodyguard, and kicked him in the leg. "Vin, I had another vision! I saw my brother, and he was killing another unmarked!" Rather brutally at that, with a rock, to the face, until the unpleasant dream had given her a taste of what it'd feel like to have her skull caved in by a blunt object.

Vin stirred from his sleep. Comfortable enough to sleep while she did, at least a little, and he set his dragon eyes on her as the late twilight washed the sleepiness from him.

"Another vision?"

"Yeah, of my brother! He was killing another unmarked... so I guess it was the other guy I was really having a vision of, but still, it's nice to know David is out there, doing something." And if she didn't get a dream of him dying, then he had to still be alive.

"Killing other unmarked?" After a moment of contemplation, Vinicius rumbled and shrugged. "He was tiny and weak."

"Hey! He's... okay yeah, he's pretty short, and thin, but he's in good shape. We worked out all the time, on the surface."

"How did he kill the other?"

"With a rock, I'll have you know. He was straddling him, so he probably tackled him and took him out like it was 100,000 BC."

Of course, the giant demon had no idea what Mia meant, but he didn't care, either. Vinicius got to his feet, rotated his four arms, shook out his tail, and nodded with approval. He was no longer bothered by his injuries, judging from the satisfied look on his face.

"We may go."

"Go?"

"On the journey."

"You're healed already?"

"Yes."

She frowned up at him and looked at the scars. Vin had a lot of scars, places where the flesh wasn't quite the same shade of dark red as other places, but the fresh wounds were obviously brighter red.

“No, you're not.”

“I am enough. Let's go.”

“Yeah, well, you say that, but you'll have to convince Romakus.”

Growling, the giant demon headed for the alcove exit.

“I don't have to convince him. If he tries to stop me, I will kill him.”

She ran in front of him and poked him in the stomach.

“You're still injured. It's like that fight with the angels, remember? You might have won that if the wounds you'd gotten from those demons who ambushed us had healed.” And if she hadn't stopped him from killing them. Whatever. She kicked him in the shin for good measure, but even wearing her sandals, it was like kicking a solid door, and he didn't react or budge. “I strongly recommend you take another day, at least! Preferably, you know, four more? Just sit down, relax, and—”

“I do not relax.”

“I'm seeing that! But relaxing is important for psycho... logical... health.” She dragged her fingers down her face. “Yes, I know. You're a demon, not a human. But the fact we're having a conversation at all means you're more human than not. So, just, relax, okay?”

“The world is going to end, and you wish to relax?”

“I don't want to, but I know how important it is!” She reached up, gently pushed against his enormous abs a couple feet above her head, and nudged him back into the alcove. “I know it'll be important physiologically, and psychologically, and you may not like to hear it, but I'm a pretty damn smart girl, okay? So just... do what I say, please? And then once we've saved the world, you can go back to your rampaging.”

More rumbles and growls, but all quiet and relenting. Slowly but surely, she was understanding Vin, or at least what his triggers were and weren't. Being direct with him was the way to go, and promising rewards was also the way to go.

Of course, that dangled a very weird carrot between them. Demons loved violence, and demons loved sex. Problematically, his sexual interests included her, and that meant the bodyguard that she was actively forcing to do her bidding with a literal pain leash, wanted to fuck her. He could use that against

her, demand she have sex with him or he wouldn't obey her commands, and sure she could use the leash and bring him to his knees in pain, but that wouldn't be enough to actually make him comply. Except, maybe to 'sit' or 'stop'.

She did her best to not think about it. Trading sex for protection was fucked up, on the surface. In Hell, it was probably a normal thing. Or not normal, because demons wouldn't bother trading. They'd just take.

Ugh. Why did ethics have to be so weird and fucked up in Hell?

"How about this?" she said. "Romakus isn't stupid. He's going to help us, whether he wants to or not. Yosepha probably told him to make sure we don't get hurt, and that if we have to — or decide to — leave before she or Galon get here, that he sticks with us. Fate of the world and all that, you know?"

"The larger our group, the easier we are to find. Death's Grip has many tunnels, but of the other provinces, only the Scar and Angel's Spine have as many." Vin snarled as he sat down. "It'd be wise to be careful about recruiting companions."

"I suppose, but two is way too small a number. What about, uh, four more, for the incubi, three for Romakus and Livian and Julisa, totaling seven more? Nine, like the Fellowship of the Ring!" She didn't wait for the predictable grunt of confusion. "And the puppers. And Yulia and her nameless buddy, if they want. And maybe Yosepha and Galon, if they have to abandon Heaven for whatever reason. And... okay yeah, maybe getting a tiny army together wouldn't be the best idea, if it meant the angels could find us easily." From what Yosepha said, Heaven was sending out thousands of scouting parties to look for, and potentially assassinate, the unmarked. But if Heaven knew for sure where one of the unmarked was, they had to power to send tens of thousands. And a thousand orbital laser cannons firing down on their location would probably be death no matter how deep they hid underground.

"I needed no army when I fought alone," Vin said.

"That was a long time ago."

"Demons do not age."

"No, but, like you said before, you're not feeling like your old self, right? Centuries of getting tortured, locked up in a dungeon, only to get ambushed by demons and then angels? Give yourself a break. I'm sure you'll be back to your rampaging ways in no time." And that was the exact wrong way to deal with Vin, trying to appeal to any sort of desire for sympathy, the last thing he wanted. Quick, change course. "Or, you know, we can go on this trip because you think we can, and the next time



angels show up, you have to fight off a hundred instead of just three. Think you can manage that, asshole?” Better, better.

He rumbled, but it was long and quiet, a ‘I see your point’ sorta rumble.

“Belor fought off a hundred angels alone before. But he wore aera armor. And was in his prime.” He held out a hand in front of him, and experimented with squeezing it, testing his wounds some more.

“You knew Belor?”

“Barely. I told him his attempts to control the False Gate spire in the new age was foolish. He disagreed.”

Oh god he was actually talking about his past. Progress!

“He was a child of Abaddon, right?” she asked. “An abdarin?”

“Yes.”

“And Abaddon was to False Gate what Belial was to Death’s Grip?”

“Yes.”

“So you didn’t fight each other? ‘Cause you wanted to own different provinces, right?”

He shrugged. “If things had gone according to plan, I would rule Death’s Grip, he would rule False Gate, and we would battle to the death, eventually.”

“What? Why?” It was a stupid question, but she couldn’t take it back now.

The dragon snorted a quick chuckle.

“Why did Zelandariel and Alessio fight?”

“To... rule as much land as they could.” All that warranted was a groan. It was so ridiculous, but this was Hell, a world of extreme absurdities day in day out. “Maybe Alessio will play nice if we run into each other while we cross the Black Valley?”

“Maybe. Or she’ll be angry you killed Zel and not her.”

“God damn it.” Sighing, she walked back up to her bodyguard and stood between his legs. Time for a topic change. “Speak with Julisa again, yet?”

“No.”

“Okay, well, picture this.” She held out her hands in front of her and framed an imaginary TV screen. “Us and the Damall, or at least this group of the Damall, going on a journey across Hell. We

work together, watch each other's backs, and whenever the mood strikes us, we have an orgy! You're nearly all healed up. You can pick up Julisa and Livian and fuck both those tetrads into a coma, at the same time, considering how you're equipped. Sound good?"

He smirked, highlighting the size of his crocodile teeth.

"And you?"

"Me?"

"You said orgy. Who will you fuck?"

"I uh... I mean, if I decided to partake — if! — then I guess, uh, Faust and the boys? They're fun, and handsome." And she still remembered how the girl she'd seen in the spire had been getting fucked by a bunch of incubi at the same time, Faust included. Human-like as the incubi were, they were still quite tall, a bit larger than human men, ridiculously inhumanly sexy, and had thick, nearly foot-long penises. And somehow, the betrayer in the spire had had one in her pussy and two in her ass at the same time. Just, how?

Vinicius half growled, half snarled, licked his teeth, and leaned down toward her. She almost jumped back. That was an angry-looking Vin.

"I doubt it," he said.

"What?"

He gently thumped his tail on the floor a couple times, licked his teeth a couple times to match, and said nothing.

She frowned up at him, folded her arms across her chest, and tapped her foot. Classic irritated mom pose, but she knew it wouldn't work on him. After a few more seconds of silence, she scrunched up her nose, grabbed her egg-puppers, and left.

Yulia joined her, without her own bodyguard, and her super skinny, dainty body walked with an almost surreal lightness to it.

"I'm surprised you can't fly," Mia asked, grunting with the weight of the egg. "Well, I mean, I guess I can understand why, from an aerodynamic perspective. Birds on the surface weigh almost nothing. But still, you look like you should be able to fly." Dilojas — bat girls — didn't even have arms, not really. They had wings with a finger and thumb claw on the main joint, instead of just the lone thumb claw like most demon wings. She used them to interact with things, like tongs. Click click.

Yulia beamed. She was so cute, with her tiny chipmunk nose and thin features, and considering she wasn't all that much taller than Mia, she was the closest thing Mia had to someone she could talk to that wasn't super physically imposing. Plus, she had long demon dreadlocks, thick strands of hair as thick as a finger, and they were so much fun to play with. She'd helped Yulia put them in something like a simple braid, and Yulia giggled as she gently shook her head hard enough to make it bounce against her shoulders.

"Angels are a lot heavier than me," she said. "They fly using their grace."

"They cheat."

"Exactly."

They laughed.

"Where's your buddy?" Mia asked.

"Having sex with one of the gorgals."

"Oh. You two aren't... you know..."

Yulia raised an eyebrow. Right. Sex didn't mean to demons what it meant to humans. Then again, sex didn't mean all that much to humans anymore, either, if it ever really did.

"Humans are so funny," Yulia said. "You're like the girls in scrying pools!"

"I am not. I... Which girls have you been watching?"

She shrugged. "The fun ones. Real stuff. They go to clubs and dance. A lot of the time they have sex while they're there, often where people can watch. Those are fun."

"That... sounds a lot like what happens in Hell naturally, though."

"No no! The boys and girls at the club, they're all sweet and innocent. It's fun, watching the sweet, innocent humans do naughty things."

"I'm not sure I'd say a bunch of drunk, tripping college kids are sweet and innocent."

"But they are." She giggled and wiggled her nose. "But even they won't fuck anyone they want. They get worried about dumb things like what other people think about who they fuck. Who cares about that?"

"Well, I mean, social dynamics are pretty nuanced on the surface, you know? And..." From the look in Yulia's eyes, there was no point in trying to approach the topic with pragmatic, detail-oriented reasoning. "Humans care about a lot of stuff that doesn't really matter."

“I know! Just, fuck who you want to fuck.”

“Girls can get pregnant on the surface from that.”

“Condoms!”

“Don’t always work.”

“Pills!”

“Birth control pills are really rough on a girl’s body.”

“Abortion!”

Mia winced. “Uh, not so easy to do, for a bunch of reasons.”

Frowning, Yulia flapped her arm wings a couple times, like a bird testing the air.

“The surface world is strange. Things are easier down here.”

Mia laughed. “Simpler, sure, but easier? It’s not life and death every day for most people on the surface. A lot of us die from boredom, not real problems.”

Yulia scratched her hair and pulled and her black dreadlocks with her thumb claws.

“Boredom is such a strange problem to have.”

“Very true. We...” Her voice trailed off as someone stepped around the corner, and their gorgeous eyes slapped the train of thought right out of Mia’s head.

Galon. The angel.

“Galon!” Giggling, Yulia half glided, half ran up to the tall man, and hugged him. Hug included a kiss, too, and the angel smiled as he returned it. A cute, quick kiss, with all the emotional attachment of a helium balloon.

“Yulia,” he said, voice smooth as singing silk. “Oh, and the unmarked girl herself. Mia.” He approached, and once he reached her, Mia did her best to not fall over. That was a very tall man. Sure, seven feet tall wasn’t all that big for a demon, and most vrats were taller than that, but it was different when it was on a human-like man, proportional and muscular. Not to mention the absurdly handsome face, clean shaven, tan skin, and long dark hair.

His deep, bronze eyes pierced straight through her, despite his warm smile and gentle expression. So muscular, but lean, too, not too wide like a brute. And in his potram rune clothes, he looked like a Greek god, white silk crossing one shoulder and one side of his chest, along with a loose skirt that didn’t reach his knees. It wasn’t as revealing as Mia’s clothes, but it wasn’t far off, either.

“H-Hi,” she said.

“Hello. We never got to speak properly.” He squatted down in front of her, head coming just below hers, and gave his giant, white, feathery, perfect wings a couple flaps. “I’m Galon, gabriem of the Heavenly Island Avinoam. You know Yosepha well, I assume.”

“Assume?”

“We ran into each other as I flew back, but didn’t have much time to speak.” He stood back up. No taking of her hand and kissing her knuckles? Aw. She’d kinda expected it, judging from how hilariously confident and forward the man was.

The stories Yosepha had shared of the gabriem and the crazy things they did to sexually satisfy the souls of Heaven shot through Mia’s mind like a tracer bullet. And behind it came images of this man in front of her, sitting in a hot tub, gently bouncing a small redhead girl on his huge cock at just the right angle to make sure its thick, swollen tip hit her g-spot with every stroke. A tiny redheaded girl he could lift like a toy and fill with cum, before he held her snug to his gorgeous body, combed her hair with his fingers, and hugged her as she came, too.

A tingling sensation hit her, and it didn’t come from inside her. It came from outside her. That was a sin aura.

Mia shot Yulia a glare. “I feel that! Stop that.”

“Aw. I wanted you to do the thing again. Faust and Livian and—”

“Well it’s not happening!”

Yulia pouted and hid behind one of Galon’s wings. For a bat demon, she had a good sin aura, strong, and sneaky.

Galon smiled down at Yulia, patted her on the head, and earned a couple chirps from her, before he gestured to Mia.

“I did feel your aura for a moment there, Mia,” he said. “A tricky thing, isn’t it? Demons have to be subtle with their auras if they don’t want someone to try to resist them. But yours is... there. I can’t resist it.”

“That does seem to be the case, yeah. One of my quirks.”

“A dangerous quirk. Yosepha had time to tell me she likes you, but to also be careful of your aura when you’re aroused.”

Mia blushed. “Y-Yeah.”

“Yeah!” Yulia said, and peeked out from under Galon’s wing. “She had half the Damall in an orgy not even a week ago! The aura filled the tunnels and everything.”

“That’s interesting.” Nodding with furrowed, thinking brows, the angel walked around Mia, eyes down on the ground. “Auras are normally trapped to the room the demon or angel use them in. Like waves in water that die quickly.”

“I know my aura has been... reaching further, than it used to. I don’t know why.”

“Another mystery. Maybe you’re getting better at using it?”

“Maybe.”

He clapped his hands together once and held them there as he stopped in front of her and hooked his wings snug to his back.

“Yosepha did also tell me you’ve been working on something else. Did you want some help with practicing that?”

“I do, yeah!” She beamed up at him. A demon would never offer to help, not so directly, but the angel didn’t hesitate or ask for anything in return, and that just felt so damn wonderful to have around again. She missed Yosepha. And sure, Galon probably had ulterior motives, to keep an eye on her and figure out what her abilities were, but still.

“I know I can’t come,” Yulia said. “So come see me later.” She pushed up on her tippy toe claws, and gave Galon a kiss on the chin. “Please?”

He smiled down at her and winked. On any other man, that would have looked dumb and cringe, but on this ridiculous angel, it was utterly perfect.

The souls in Heaven were lucky, if they were being treated and cared for by gabriem.

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“Still too heavy,” she said, sweat dripping down her forehead.

“But you’ve managed to keep your potram on. That’s good.”

Galon sat nearby, leaning forward over one knee, watching her. Sure, he had the look of a playboy, with all those sexy smiles and stuff, but he was good at keeping his eyes on hers and not on her

very exposed body. Much as Mia loved having clothes again, her dress was very much a ‘fuck me’ dress. She felt less naked when naked. But, sandals were a godsend, literally, and she wasn’t about to give them up.

They’d gone back to the alcove Yosepha had first taken Mia to, high up and out of the way where demons would have trouble reaching, with all the remnants filling up the hole that led to it. Perfect for talking about secret stuff.

“It’s getting easier,” she said. “How hard is it for angels to use batlam the first time?”

“Not this hard. You’re really struggling.”

She threw up her hands. “Thanks for the words of encouragement!”

He grinned. “Would you want empty words of encouragement?”

“No…” She squinted at him. There was more to his playful looks than a playboy happy to seduce any woman — or man — who got within arm’s reach. He was analyzing her. Yosepha had said gabriem weren’t just experts at keeping humans happy, sexually or otherwise, but also at treating mental wounds. Maybe they could talk about psychology?

“We don’t know what you are,” he said. “You seem to be a soul, but something else, too, a first in all of existence. No one has the slightest clue about you.”

“I’m not sure if I should feel bad or good about that.”

“Well, don’t forget you’re in Hell. The portal to Hell literally came to Heaven to scoop you up, too, and that is not normal, either. And probably not a good thing.”

Fuck. She sighed and sat down, not too far away from the angel, adjusted her borderline useless split skirt to keep her bits covered, and melted with exhaustion like a plastic toy left on the dashboard on a hot day.

“So I might not even be able to use the batlam rune.”

“Maybe not. But if what you say about your knowledge of the runes is true, I’m sure you’ll be able to eventually, somehow, and even other runes beyond the ones angels can use.”

“You really don’t know about the other ones? I can see ones for life, death, hellfire, healing water, all sorts of things.”

He shook his head. “Just the three. Potram, batlam, and royam.”

“Strange. There are so many! And the ancient language, they sorta... they run parallel to each other, in a way. It’s like, the runes are chunks of the language all balled up and arranged into something... whole, something with power. And...” Sighing, she wiped the sweat from her brow, and patted the egg sitting beside her. “And I suppose no one’s ever felt nests before, have they? Like, felt them, like a weird sensation in the brain, like someone touching your shoulder?”

“Nope.”

She laughed. “I’ve spent the past hour just talking about me and my quirks. Tell me about you! What’s Heaven like? What it’s like being a gabriem? How’d you end up befriending the Damall? Why’re you and Yosepha allowed to come and go from Heaven whenever you want?”

He held up his hands, surrendering.

“Yosepha and I can come and go from Heaven because we’re not at war with Hell. There hasn’t been a true war with Hell since the second war, Cain’s War, tens of thousands of years ago and long before I was birthed.”

“What about that fight with Belor? I thought that only happened like, a thousand years ago or something?”

“That was a... police action, if you want to think about it from a human history perspective.”

Mia snorted, but gestured for him to continue.

“Heaven and Hell aren’t enemies. Usually. And angels aren’t slaves. As long as we maintain our duties, we can do as we wish.”

“Full freedom?”

“Full freedom.”

“Wow. Heaven sounds nice.”

His smile glowed. “She is. Absolutely wonderful.” He gently flapped his wings a couple times before letting them settle. “I befriended the Damall through Yosepha. She’d run into Romakus several years ago, and he hinted that the council has been ignoring some strange things happening in Hell. Remnants escaping and wandering the Hellscape. Hellbeasts active outside twilight. Strange weather.”

“You mean the sky isn’t always on fire?”

He laughed. God damn, it was such a perfect laugh, too.

“It is, but fire tornadoes ripping apart entire sections of provinces, those are new.”



“Yeesh.”

“The longer we spoke with the Damall, the more we realized they were correct. We brought up the issues with the council, and they ignored us. Then the unmarked started appearing. So...” He gestured around them at the cave. “Here I am.” Nodding, he brought a giant wing in front of him and stroked his feathers, straightening them with the same casualness Mia sometimes combed her hair.

“And, being gabriem? What’s that like? Yosepha told me a bit, but only a bit.” A white lie. Yosepha had shared some pretty tasty details.

“Angels and demons are born with innate desires, the same as creatures on the surface. Angels desire nothing more than to protect and serve the worthy souls of Heaven, and for us gabriem, that includes treating wounds and providing pleasure.”

“That’s what she told me, yeah.”

“Imagine myself, sitting on a beach of glistening sand of gold and silver, while a woman sits next to me. Her life was cruel. Men and women took advantage of her, sometimes physically. Her husband abandoned her. Her children died of polio. She died of old age, alone in a hospital bed.”

Mia shrank in on herself with every word. It wasn’t just the description, but his inflections and tone, each note of his voice hammering home the reality of what he described. It was something he’d experienced.

“Heaven gave her a new, youthful body, a prime body, but Heaven’s waters could do little to soothe the damage to her soul. Only by speaking of her pain could she find peace.”

“That’s... so painful. Did she meet her children again?”

“No. They were young, and the young do not stay in Heaven long, seeking rebirth earlier than most. She died many decades after them.” Somehow, despite how horrible the story was, Galon continued to smile. “She and I spent many months on that beach, speaking. And when she rediscovered a spark for joy, she asked to be treated physically. We spent many more months on that beach, enjoying each other’s bodies.”

“Oh my.”

“She found a zest for life—well, the afterlife. Soon she’d found other men and women to enjoy her newfound sexuality with, and last I spoke with her, she still enjoyed orgies with a half dozen other souls, others who’d died of old age.”

“That... sounds awesome! I always figured old people would fuck like rabbits if they ever got new bodies.”

“They do..”

This was fun. Much as Mia liked Yosepha a lot, the girl was clearly a hardass. Galon was a smooth guy, someone who liked talking, liked being listened to, but also liked listening.

Mia inched a little closer.

“What sorta... sexy things have you done, in Heaven. Like, the noteworthy stuff.”

His smile turned playful, and he switched which wings he pruned.

“Yosepha did have time to warn me you are one of the most sexually obsessed souls she has ever met, by the way.”

Mia blushed, head to toe.

“That’s... I mean...” Groaning, she gestured to herself. “Look what my rune dressed me in!” Look, he did, and she blushed more. “I have a large, healthy sex drive. Apparently my potram knows that, too.”

“So Yulia tells me. Though she also tells me you’ve been hesitant to join the demons in their usual sexual antics.”

“I mean, I don’t really wanna just fuck anyone and everyone. I want romance!”

“Ah.” He nodded, adopting a super serious expression that was clearly an exaggeration. “You might find that difficult to find, here in Hell. Demons are very much a ‘I could die any time, enjoy the now’ sort of species.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

“Yulia also tells me you and Vinicius also have a strange relationship. And at least on one occasion, a sexual one.”

Mental note: kill Yulia later.

“I uh, I mean Zel forced me to... pleasure him.”

A short, quiet moment was long enough for Galon to internalize her words, come to a conclusion, and continue. He really was good at talking to people, in a way that almost made him dangerous.

“And since then?”

“Just once!”

He nodded, smile warm, and... unjudging. “I’m glad your first sexual encounter with him didn’t leave a scar on you, then.”

“It wasn’t like that. It was...” Sighing, she scooted a little closer. “But it doesn’t matter. Whatever weird quirk about my body that’s making me a walking, talking sex drug for everyone nearby, I have it under control.”

“I can literally feel your aura right now, Mia.”

“Yeah but it’s tiny! I’m muting the strings.”

“Strings?”

“It’s... a long story. Don’t worry about it.”

“Well, either way, I understand what you’re saying, but you might want to reconsider.”

She gasped, exaggerating too. “You... don’t think I should look for romance?”

“Ha. I think you should, just understand that demons don’t fuck because of it.”

“I gathered that much.”

It was his turn to sigh, and he held out his closer wing against the wall. Without even thinking about it, she scooted in closer again so he could put it around her shoulders. Why was she giving into him so easily? She felt like some young girl, falling in love with her therapist because she didn’t know any fucking better, didn’t know herself, didn’t have any confidence, and was throwing herself at the first person who listened and talked to her like she was an adult.

Well, the first step to not being a dumbass was realizing she was being a dumbass. She’d just met this guy, was getting swept up the gabriem’s wake, and as long as she remembered that, she could keep her heart squarely secure in her chest.

That metaphor had new connotations in Hell. Eep.

“I... admit,” he said, “that you’re the first soul I’ve ever talked to that is simultaneously a good soul worthy of Heaven, but now has to deal with the pains of Hell. Other than your brother, I mean. If we were in Avinoam, I would be spending as much time with you as needed to help you forget the scars inflicted on you by this plane.”

That was a fancy way of saying he’d fuck her as much as she wanted, if they were in Heaven. Oh my.

“Let me guess. From what Yosepha or Yulia told you, I’d be asking you to get your male friends together so I could have an orgy every night. And day.”

“And I’d do it, too. Happily. As to your earlier question about the things I’ve done, I once had a woman ask to be taken by four men at once. Two to penetrate her sex, and two to penetrate her ass, all at the same time. Finding the positions to allow that was difficult.”

Oh god. She shivered, gulped, and gave herself a not-so-gentle slap on the cheek.

“Uh, as for the pains of Hell,” she said, “it hasn’t been that bad. I mean, it’s been horrible, but not nearly as bad as it could be, you know? Every time I see a remnant, I feel so bad, and sometimes I see the things demons do to new souls, and...” She frowned down at the ground. “Demons are cruel. I find it hard to... want to have sex with cruel people.”

“Demons can be cruel, yes. But many years ago, I had a rather short-lived relationship with a tregeera, and...” He laughed. “She was quite mean, but not cruel. We enjoyed each other.”

“It’s hard to tell when a demon is being mean or really, really mean, you know? Some demons are just absolutely horrible. Some aren’t! I knew a vratorin named Adron, and he was actually kinda nice and fun. And then there was this sarkarin named Kasimiro, and he was mean, but he also didn’t like how bloodthirsty demons were, so he was nice! Sorta, you know? And...” She threw up her hands. “And then there’s Faust, Gallius, Oudoceus, and Locutus. They’re nice and fun, but I think they’re being sneaky, too, you know? More going on in there than they want anyone to realize.” She pointed at her temple.

“Probably,” Galon said.

“And then there’s Vinicius. I’m supposed to be keeping him as a bodyguard and servant, you know? A slave! I’m supposed to use the leash and force him to protect me. But half the time I’m around him, I’m nervous he’s going to pounce me and... do things to me.”

Galon raised an eyebrow as he looked at her, but a smile slowly crept onto his lips. Uh oh.

“You like that idea.”

“I do not!”

“Mia, I have worked with thousands of women in my life. You would hardly be the first that wanted to be pinned and ravaged by a colossal beast known throughout an entire land as deadly. A creature of legend.”

Mia squirmed. It was pointless dodging around these topics with Galon. Yosepha, sure, Mia could negotiate the conversation because the mikalim angel didn't seem to be very in-the-know about what souls on the surface were into. Attempts to play coy with Galon would only backfire. Given the sneaky, confident, playful looks he was giving her, he probably already knew she'd read dozens of, and had masturbated to, all sorts of erotica that fit that description. Plenty of straight-up porn of it, too.

"Yeah, okay, true. But those are fantasies! This is real. Vin's a bad demon who's done a lot of very bad things."

"He has engaged in slaughter on an unprecedented scale. But, that's Hell. And as far as I know, he hasn't engaged in acts of torture or rape." Galon patted her shoulders with his wing. "Compared to someone like Valzanal, he's not that bad."

"Not that bad? Are you trying to defend him?"

"I'm... saying you shouldn't hold demons to the same standards as souls. They have different rules and grow up in a different environment. If you find a demon that doesn't enjoy inflicting pain purely for the joy of torture, that is a demon worth considering... nice."

She laughed. "You're right, I know. It's just so hard to get used to! I've only been in Hell for... not even four weeks? So much has happened, it's crazy."

"Very much so, and it's only going to get crazier, I bet." He patted her head with his feathers. "So, as the only gabriem you are likely to speak with for a long time, I have some advice to offer."

"By all means."

"You're pretty lucky to have escaped the spire, and luckier still to have met the Damall. The demons here aren't torturers. And from what I know of Vin, neither is he. If you see an opportunity to have yourself some fun, take it."

"Fun..."

"Fun. Yosepha's made it clear you're a very sexual soul. Your idea of fun includes four incubi all trying to get their dicks inside you at the same time, doesn't it? Just like in my example of that woman with me, and three other angels."

She could not blush anymore if someone drowned her in tomato juice.

"Um..."

"Your idea of fun includes someone like that vratorin and sarkarin you mentioned, filling you until you're ready to burst."

“I uh—”

“Your idea of fun includes a colossus like Vinicius, lifting you up and using you as a Fleshlight.”

He knew what a Fleshlight was! She buried her face in her palms. This conversation was not happening.

“Heaven is going to get more involved eventually,” he said. “Right now, there are scouting parties looking for the unmarked, but it won’t stay that way. Soon, the skies will fill with angel wings, and the council will remind the spire rulers just how insignificant they are compared to the armies of Heaven.” He pulled his wing back in tandem with his expression growing progressively more serious. “If it weren’t for the patrols and the eyes of the council, I’d take you to the Forgotten Place myself.”

Oh thank god a topic shift to something more serious. Much as Mia was growing more comfortable talking about her sexuality, Galon came at it with more than just bluntness. He came at it with knowledge. Talking with chronically horny demons was one thing. Talking with an angel who could read her like an open book was another thing entirely.

“Y-Yeah? Yosepha wasn’t completely convinced she could trust me.”

“She changed her mind, by the end, no?”

“I... guess so.”

“Yosepha is a dear friend, but she is mikalim. Not exactly the best judge of character.” He chuckled as he got up. “My point is, you and your brother are people I think are worth helping, but Heaven disagrees. So I’ll help you in secret. If that means giving you some sex tips, then I’ll give you some sex tips.” He winked at her, reached out with a wing, and poked her in the forehead with a feather. Soft. “The pains of Hell are many. The pleasures are few. Enjoy them when and where you can. If that means being the center of attention of a host of demons who are all desperate to get their cocks inside any hole you can give them, then enjoy.”

“You don’t have to word it like that!”

His evil grin softened. “And if you think you can find romance in Hell, then do that, too, but don’t deny what pleasures you can on a fool’s hope.”

After a serious sigh, she stood up too and gave her cheeks a couple pats.

“You’re right, you’re right. It’s just... hard to expose myself willingly to demons. They’re dangerous, you know?”

“I know all too well.” Nodding, he paced in front of her, fingers on his chin. “There is something else we can try, to make you feel safer around demons, another way to learn batlam.”

“Another way?”

“Yes. Angels and humans are not the same. The human mind is... complicated, and nuanced. Angels and demons have clearer ways of thinking, more direct, with little to distract our thoughts. Usually. To wear a rune needs not only effort to lift it, but a clear state of mind to engage it. Potram is easy enough, but if you’re trying to use batlam and you can’t focus on it clearly, it becomes heavier.”

“Ooh. I need to go zen on this and clear my mind and stuff?”

“Yes, but I don’t think meditation is going to work. It takes years of practice for humans to learn how to meditate effectively. No, I think we’ll need a different approach.”

Gold light filled the room, and Mia squinted while holding up a hand to block the powerful glow. It only took a moment for the angel to put his batlam rune on, and wear his glorious armor of Heaven. Gold and silver, with white silk drifting out between the joints. It wasn’t as thick as Yosepha’s, and instead of a sword and shield, he sported a beautiful bow of the same color as his armor. A quiver sat along his back between his wings, and he casually reached for an arrow. Its head shined like a mirror.

“Uh... Galon?”

He lifted the bow, knocked the arrow, and pointed it at Mia.

“Equip your batlam rune and block this arrow.”

“Uh, Galon!”

He drew back the string.

“Galon! Wai—”

He released the string.