

~~David~~

“I can’t believe she really said that,” he said. “Fate of the world? Are you serious?”

“Everything about you is weird, David,” Jes said between grunts, followed by the heavy crack of a rock rolling down over other rocks.

Moving big rocks was a pain, but they blocked their path in the tunnel, and try as David might, he couldn’t move shit. Rocks were really heavy, and durable as David’s feet and hands had grown over the past week and some, his fingers couldn’t work stone nearly as well as Jes’s strength and her claws. Plus, a bunch of broken ribs didn’t agree with him trying to lift or move anything. He was useless.

“Any idea where we’ll find Dao and Caera?” he asked.

“Assuming they’re alive, back at the cave.”

“Hey, come on, they’re alive.”

“Still optimistic after everything that’s happened?” More rocks cracked, and a few broke apart as they landed on the hard stone. It was a dark tunnel, and few amber veins survived the hellquakes. Maybe Hell would grow new ones?

“I was falling to my death, and Mia’s, straight down toward that weird nothingness, when suddenly a beautiful red angel swooped down from the sky and saved us. I’m feeling a little optimistic, yeah. A little lucky, too.”

She stared at him, laughed, and shook her head as she tore a few more big rocks down from the tunnel path.

“And then a gold bitch showed up and took your sis away.”

“Yeah, I’m trying to not think about that part.”

“But hey, you got the beautiful part right.”

David smiled. Maybe it was the drop in insanity, adrenaline plummeting, or maybe it was all the quiet now that the quakes were over, but he felt like talking. First time for everything. Plus, talking helped keep his mind off just how fucked he was, physically, and how hungry he was getting.

He didn’t want to eat. Eating meant a dose of memories that weren’t his. Easy to catalog and ignore, but last time they’d hit him like a baseball bat to the face and that’s how he expected it to go a second time. It hadn’t happened with a forbidden fruit, though. Maybe they could find one of those?

The rider attacking the spire was unlucky. Getting saved by Jes was lucky. The stranger kidnapping Mia was unlucky. If the pattern held, they'd find a withered tree growing some forbidden fruit on the other side of the pile of rocks.

They did not. Just more tunnel. Better than a Cainite ambush.

They walked in silence for a bit. Jes sneaked a few glances David's way, prowling along beside him with her wings hooked around her shoulders like a cape. He snuck some glances up at her and smiled when she caught him.

"Stop smiling at me."

"Sorry."

"I know what you're thinking. That I flew down to save you because I like you."

"I mean—ow!"

She whipped him in the ass with her tail, and she was not gentle. Only his leather skirt kept it from drawing blood.

"I told you. Dao was throwing a fit and freaking out, ready to jump down herself like she had wings or something. Caera had to hold her back. I did it for her."

His smile only grew. "You love her."

"Yes, I love her, you asshole. Not sure why she's so into you, though. You're lucky, some sort of puppy dog that she's grown super attached to in a single week."

"I mean, I am adorable."

She rolled her eyes. "Uh huh."

"It's like that Rosa puppy meme."

"What?"

"Never mind." He couldn't help but laugh. Which stopped very quickly when pain ripped up through his body from his ribs.

"The fuck has gotten into you? Normally, you can't open your mouth without tripping over it. Now you sound like your sister; the whole two minutes I got to talk to her."

"I don't... okay, yeah. I guess seeing my sister again really settled my nerves. Helps me talk more normally. Plus, there's only one of you."

She raised her black-skin eyebrow. “One of me?”

“Yeah, one of you. One of anyone, really. Talking one on one is a thousand times easier than talking to a group.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “Guess I’m just a classic introvert. Talking one on one is fine. It’s when there’s a group, things get difficult. But, if I know the person, talking isn’t so hard.”

“You don’t know me.” After a small snarl, she stepped ahead of him, and matched pace a few feet ahead. That was a small burst of anger he hadn’t seen coming, at all.

So much for mastering socializing.

“I... I didn’t mean...” Sighing, he jumped ahead to catch up to her. “You’re right.”

“I know.”

It took effort to not frown. Jes did not make it easy.

“We can talk about what to do when we find Caera and Dao. So, in the meantime, tell me about yourself.”

Jes laughed. And laughed. And laughed, to the point she stopped and rested a hand against the wall.

“Are you fucking serious?”

“I... was. Now I’m not so sure.”

After a few more laughs, she brushed the back of his body a few times with her wing, and got walking again.

“I keep forgetting you’re not like other souls. Literally. No number or anything.”

“And if I had a number?”

“Then I’d assume you were trying to manipulate me, with a ridiculous request like that.”

“Oh.”

She grinned over her shoulder at him, reached out with her wing, and used its thumb claw to hook around his neck and pull him in close to her side. From angry to happy in seconds. Much as David sucked at reading people, Jeskura was all over the place, regardless.

“Told you before, I was born in the hatching pits around sixty years ago.”

“How’d that go? From what you told me, that’s a rough way to start life.”

“Yeah... yeah it was.” She sighed, let him go, re-hooked her wing on her own shoulder, but didn’t push him away. “You may have noticed me, Dao, Caera, we’re not exactly the type to go around mindlessly killing whoever we can.”

“I did.”

“We have our reasons. Caera saw some serious shit in the horde call. That probably changed her. I knew an asshole in the spire called Kasimiro with a kill count that makes even Caera look like a child, but hates violence, and how much demons love it. I know demons who get pretty attached to their betrayers, like that Adron guy you mentioned. Dao had to deal with that Tacitus fuck. Some of us just... get exposed to different kinds of stuff, I guess. We turn out different.”

“Sounds pretty human, honestly.”

“Yeah?”

“The whole nature versus nurture argument. How much is a person shaped by the innate biology of their brain and body, versus what their life was like growing up.” He tapped his chin. “I guess, I never really thought demons would be like that. Humans kinda just assume all demons must be horrible, innately.”

“Grow up in a hatching pit and you probably will be, but plenty of us aren’t. The nicer demons get killed and eaten.”

“Eesh.”

“But some of us watched a few too many scrying pools and maybe got a little carried away with some of the stuff in them. I remember sitting around one in the hatching pit with a few other gorgalas, and we were swooning over this big human man, very strong, very handsome. He was saving a girl from a fire.”

David raised a brow. “Was he a... firefighter?”

She laughed. “He was.” She spun around a couple times in a very un-Jeskura way as she jumped ahead a little. “It was amazing, seeing someone go through flames to save someone’s life. It was the last thing you’d ever expect to see in the hatching pit.”

He rolled his eyes, but couldn’t help but laugh. “This was in the 60s, right? Pretty crazy for a firefighter to actually go through flames, back then. Not the best gear.”

“It was crazy.” She flicked her tail back at him and poked him several times as she walked ahead. “And of course, more than a few of those firefighters got some good pussy. That was great to watch, too.”

“Ha. That a normal thing, watching people have sex on the surface with the scrying pools?”

“It is, in the hatching pits. Demons aren’t born babies like humans, not really. More like, a kid adult mix? Whatever, it’s not long before we’re horny as fuck and have no idea what to do with ourselves.”

He gestured down at himself, and her tail that continued to poke and prod his chest and stomach. Ow. Ow.

“Sorry I’m not a two hundred pound, six foot six firefighter made of pure muscle.”

“Ha, fuck me that’d be awesome if you were.”

He frowned. She laughed.

“I guess,” she said, “I did spend too much time watching the scrying pool, but something about the surface really intrigued me. Humans and all their stupid bullshit, the romance, the fights, it’s all so much more... deep, I guess, than the shit down here. Here we just fight and fuck.” After another chuckle, she continued, eyes now pointed down. “A gremla I knew was absolutely in love with some guy she’d randomly learned about, and she watched him in the scrying pool a lot.”

“A grem? Kinda figured they weren’t... uh... didn’t have the mental capacity to really do something like that.”

“Gremla, yeah, and of course they do. Imps and grems might not be the best at talking, and maybe not as smart as your average demon... Okay yeah they’re pretty dumb. But not hellbeast dumb. But shut up for a sec, let me talk.”

He put up his hands. “Shutting up.”

“So she watched this human in the scrying pool, this guy... think he was a cop. Good guy, had a wife, treated her well. Active sex life, which this horny little gremla girl fucking loved watching. Caught her masturbating to that shit like fifty times. The wife really had a thing for getting tied up, you know? Full on rape roleplay sorta stuff. And—”

David did his best to tune out the very detailed list of things the mysterious husband did to his wife that she apparently very much enjoyed.

“Then, one day,” she said, “the cop died. Got shot on the job. There was a funeral, lots of crying.” After a heavy sigh, Jes came to a stop and looked down. He recognized the look. She was reliving a memory. “I was pretty sad, but that gremla, it really fucked her up. Like, devastated. She cried.” Jes took another deep breath. “Then some other demons showed up looking for food, and she... didn’t fight back.”

“What?”

Jes shrugged weakly and shook her head. “Some hungry demons showed up and killed her. Pretty normal in the hatching pit. Grems and imps are damn hard to kill usually, ‘cause they’re so good at getting away. It was the first... only time I’ve ever seen one of the little rascals just let themselves die. It was quick, no torture or anything, though some demons learned some of that shit from the scrying pools, too.” Growling, she resumed the march, and David followed. “Seeing her die like that really fucked me up, too, I guess. I killed the demons that killed her, even though I wasn’t hungry and didn’t need to. And after that, I just...” She shrugged again, but each shrug got weaker than the last one. “I dunno. I didn’t really get such a thrill when making a kill anymore.”

That was definitely a core memory for Jes. Whether Hell gave a shit about neurology and synaptic pathways, he didn’t know. Probably not. But Mia had gone on a dozen rants about how important early life experiences were in forming who you were as a person. This fit the bill.

“Thanks,” he said, “for telling me about yourself, I mean. Kinda got the impression you were just gonna tell me to fuck off when I asked.”

“I was tempted. But then I remembered you’re just that kinda moron who needs shit direct.”

“Yeah, I am.”

“Ha! You really are getting better at this talking thing.” She slowed down until she walked beside him, and again she used her wing to hook his neck and pull him in close to walk shoulder to shoulder. Or, mostly shoulder to shoulder. She had over a foot of height on him.

“Not gonna lie, being with you, Dao, and Caera for over a week straight has been the most socializing I’ve done in that short of time in my entire life.”

“Fucking nerd.”

“Yeap.”

“Heh.”

“And I really like Dao and Caera, too, but holy shit it I am so much more in my comfort zone when talking to just one of you.”

“Yeah yeah.” Chuckling, she leaned down and gave his cheek a kiss. “You got three girls riding your dick, at the same fucking time, and you’re complaining? Last I checked, that ain’t exactly common on the surface.”

“It... is not.”

“And besides, Dao only bothers to talk in Hellian, so you’re normally talking to what, two and a half girls?”

“I guess. Can Dao speak Estian, like actually talk with it?”

“All eyeless demon breeds can speak Estian, but they say the vibration fucks with their vision. Clicking and chirping are more like blinking to them, while talking Estian makes things constantly blurry. They prefer the clicks.” She gave him a gentle headbutt, suspiciously similar to how cats often do. “So they say, anyway. Don’t ask me, I got eyes.”

“So, if I asked her to talk Estian, she might?”

“Eh, she might, but most riiva prefer Hellian, Dao especially.”

“Ever heard her speak Estian?” he asked.

“Nope. I never pushed her on it, either. She’s got her reasons.”

Reasons. And from the hesitation in Jes’s eyes, those reasons were more than physical, and Jes didn’t want to share them.

He suppressed the overwhelming urge to ask. Look at that, more growth. He could ask a little more about Jes, instead.

“And you worked for Zel?”

“Work is a strong word for anything in Death’s Grip. More like, her enforcers go around and kinda just randomly enforce her rule, you know? Ever since she put in that dueling rule, she wanted to make sure demons obeyed it. I was one of the demons that enforced those kinda rules.”

“You impressed her? To get that role, I mean.”

“Of course I impressed her. I’m awesome.”

“Uh huh.”

Jes put a hand on his shoulder. “That reminds me. If we run into other demons, you should probably avoid mentioning your sister killed Zel.”

“What? Why? Kinda figured that’d earn me some clout, actually. Or at least Mia would earn some.”

“It might. It might also get you killed. Plenty of demons were loyal to Zel. Plenty were looking to be the ones to kill her, and might just take their frustration over getting denied out on you.”

“Wonderful.”

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The two of them crouched low. The ceiling made them. Much as Death’s Grip had a lot of tunnels practically designed to be walked through, it also had some not so perfect ones. Bloodgrip vines showed up, and avoiding those was a pain in the ass, but it was the low dips in the ceiling that terrified him. On a couple occasions, he had to get on his stomach to keep going. Painful, and terrifying. Stories about spelunkers getting stuck and dying horrible deaths had been enough to give him a mild case of claustrophobia, and Hell was delighting in making it a full-blown debilitating condition.

“Sure we shouldn’t go back?” he said between some grunts and groans. The pain of crawling on broken ribs had his eyes watering.

“Bloodgrip means the tunnel’s connected to other tunnels. Bloodgrip goes where there’s blood.”

Because of course Hell’s plants didn’t drink water and sunlight. They survived on pain and suffering.

Watching the gargoyle crawl along on her belly from behind was weird, kinda like looking up the ass of a winged alligator. But she did have a great ass and legs. A decent distraction from his pain, and the ever-growing fear of the rocks only inches above his head, about to fall and crush him and doom him to dying of dehydration. No, down here in Hell, he’d die over many months of essence starvation. Months of squirming and screaming in pain while rocks crushed him and—

Jes reached down and pulled him up to his feet.

“Oh thank god,” he said. “Felt like a remnant for a second, there.”



The cave opened up, and resumed being an endless tunnel of thin amber veins, the occasional stalactite, and sneaky bloodgrip vines that demanded he pay attention every step.

“I think I recognize this tunnel.” She gestured back at the section they had to crawl through. “Did that a few times, a few decades ago.”

“Decades...”

“Got a problem with older women?” Grinning, she dragged her tail along his stomach a few times as she walked ahead.

“You sure you’re older?”

“I am the spitting image of maturity, wisdom, and beauty. And—” She cut her voice off, whipped her head around, and pushed him back with a wing. If not for the way her eyes widened, he’d have cursed or yelled with the pain.

Silence.

He opened his mouth, Jes shot him a hard look, and he shut up. Silence for him, but she heard something.

She pushed forward. He followed, but at a distance, and drew his—oh, right, no more broken sword. That Adron vrat had taken it and stabbed the rider in the neck with it, a wound that apparently hadn’t done a damn thing to the bastard. Good note for the future: the rider did not die easy.

So, his shoulder was fucked, his nose hurt like hell, he had broken ribs, and he didn’t even have his useless, broken sword anymore. He’d grown attached to it, the ability to defend himself, if even only a little.

Noises in the distance sent his heart rate up, and he forced himself to take deep, slow breaths. Cainites? Demons? Imps and grems scavenging on remnants, or big demons on the hunt for prey? David probably looked like good prey right about now, helpless and already tenderized.

The curves of the tunnels, like veins through Hell’s underside, made it easy to sneak up on people. A hellbeast could have been waiting around the corner to pounce them, and the only way they’d know was Jes’s ears and nose. He was useless.

That time he’d helped Caera on a hunt, that’d been strange. His aura had changed and flared, grown angry, and violent. For a moment he’d been ready to do something he’d never done before, commit murder, and he had no idea if that was the aura’s doing, or the aura was just putting out what

he'd been feeling. Could it help now? What would it even do? Maybe do what the rider's did, and make everyone nearby go mad with bloodlust.

He felt nothing but anxiety, and fear. So much for that idea.

He closed his eyes, and shining symbols danced behind his eyelids. Potram, royam, batlam. All the strange runes Mia had sent into his mind, all incomplete, but not. They weren't missing pieces, his brain was, something he needed if he wanted to understand them the same way he understood the ancient language. But potram, royam, and batlam stuck out, almost like they were demanding his attention. He could almost read them, almost understand them.

His heart rate soared as the distant noises grew louder. The batlam rune flared in his mind. White wings. Gold glow. A sword and shield. A spear and a tower shield. A bow.

The noises grew closer. Clop, clop. Hooves? David pressed his back against the inside of the tunnel curve, and Jes did the same ahead of him, wings out and snug to the wall. Closer. Clop clop. Maybe a riiva? Maybe—

Amber veins beyond the curve out of sight cast shadows, and whoever came their way was much bigger than a riiva.

They came around the corner. Jes roared and pounced. The huge demon let out a shriek of her own as she fell back. Spindly, skeletal wings spread, but they couldn't stop Jes from knocking the tall demon to the ground.

That, was a lot of jiggle.

“Acelina!?” Jes, straddling the demon's stomach and ready to tear her apart, froze, one hand in the air and claws out. “The fuck?”

“Jeskura?” The huge demon, knocked on her ass and back, stared up at Jes with a big, angry scowl. Or at least, probably stared up at her. She had no eyes. In fact, her whole face was black, her face and her horns and neck and chin, all of it. It made her big sharp white teeth stick out against the black canvas.

Damn, she was tall. And ridiculously busty. Made Dao look flat levels of busty. No matter how hard he tried, David couldn't help but notice the very naked demon and how her huge breasts squashed and flattened as they conformed to her chest with gravity. Even unaroused and with dark skin, her boobs were big enough they couldn't escape the pull of their weight. And her nipples were pierced with tiny bones. A lot of her was pierced with tiny bones, or little metal studs, and she wore several metal chain necklaces, and belly chains. More jewelry than on any demon he'd seen yet, by a lot.

“Thought I saw you gliding out of the spire. Get knocked out by the quake?” Jes whip cracked her tail behind her. The tall demon underneath her had a tail too, smooth like Jes’s, but not long enough or thick enough to be dangerous. “Give me one reason I shouldn’t rip your throat out, you fucking bitch.”

“I have done nothing to deserve such treatment!”

“Yeah? You’re a fucking asshole and the worst zotiva in Hell.”

The nine-foot-tall demoness hissed and squirmed, but for all her superior height, she didn’t take a swing at the gargoyle.

“I was hard on the hatchlings. I had to be. Zel wanted—”

“Yeah well, Zel’s dead. Rider got her. And on top of that, you’re stuck on this side of the canyon.” How Jes managed to lie without even the smallest break in her voice, David couldn’t fathom. Might as well have asked him to lift a building than lie smoothly.

“Jes,” David said. “Who is this?”

“This,” Jes said as she got up and off the much taller demon, “is Acelina, one of the spire mothers. A royal bitch. Most mothers are at least a little nice to the hatchlings, and tell them what’s up when they’re old enough to come out. Acelina might as well have been a drill sergeant.”

Acelina hissed a few more times as she stood up. For Jes to let her up probably meant Jes wasn’t scared of her. Surprising, considering how huge Acelina was, and it wasn’t like those claws of hers or her big hooves wouldn’t be able to rip and tear and crush. Or at least, they could definitely rip, tear, and crush David.

“I—” Acelina didn’t get to finish.

“Shut up,” Jes said, and she pointed a claw up at the demon. “I still haven’t decided if I’m gonna let you live. I’m hungry, and David here needs food.”

Acelina slowly turned her head and aimed it at him. If she was anything like Dao, that was her way of letting him know she was looking at him.

“Another unmarked... Zelandariel was convinced an unmarked girl would be a useful tool.”

“My sister,” he said. “She’s trapped on the other side of the canyon, now.” Which of course earned a quick, harsh glare from Jes. Okay, don’t tell Acelina anymore than she needs to know. Got it.

“So how come you fell out of the spire?” Jes said. “Where’re the others?”

“I don’t know where my fellow zotiva are. Probably still in the spire.” Acelina folded her arms across her chest and set her eyeless gaze on Jes. She was trying to not bare her fangs too much, but having trouble. Apparently, she had trouble controlling her temper. “I had heard Zelandariel was in the dungeon, and was on my down to see her when... when...” Her shoulders drooped, her wings followed, and her tail dangled behind her. “The rider killed Zelandariel?”

If this spire mother knew nothing about that, she couldn’t have been the demon David saw in the dungeon behind Mia.

“He did,” Jes said. “Turned into a big clusterfuck in the dungeon. I had to swoop in there and get my boy out, and then... ah what the fuck am I telling you this for?” Shrugging, Jes gestured to David, and resumed the walk down the curving tunnel. “That way just leads you back to the canyon, by the way, and the tunnel pinches tight. Your giant tits won’t fit through.”

Grumbling, Acelina hooked her wings to her shoulders, just like Jes would. With how skeletal and spindly her giant wings were, and the membrane thin, it kinda gave her bat-ish vampire vibes. The insane curves, ridiculous tiny waist, long legs — and arms — and regal set of four giant horns sealed in the image of a regal dominatrix or something. Super tall demon vampire dominatrix?

After a heavy scowl and frustrated hiss, Acelina turned and walked in the opposite direction, ahead of Jes and back the path she’d come from. David stared. Yeap, even the way she walked was like someone on high heels because of the hooves, much more pronounced than Dao. And that ass was—

“David!” Jes spun around and marched up to him. “I can feel that aura. Stop it. You can’t trust this bitch.”

“I didn’t... I wasn’t...”

Acelina stopped and looked over her shoulder, tail still drooping.

“Jeskura...”

“Save it! You can’t get back across the ravine, and we both know what that means, Acelina. You’re dead. I’m happy to walk away and just let you die.”

“Dead?” David asked.

“Ha, yeah. She’s screwed. Zotiva never leave the spire, and the only things they ever have to fight are some uppity hatchlings. She can pump out some powerful sin auras, but she can’t hunt or fight for shit.”

David raised a brow and looked back at the tall demon. Couldn't fight? She could probably kick his ass, sure, but if Jes was right, she wouldn't be kicking other asses very well.

Acelina looked down, her back to them, every part of her drooping.

“Stop it,” Jes said. “Stop acting all pathetic. I don't care if you loved Zel. Bitch had it coming.”

The spire mother spun around and flared her wings, teeth bared, but one step was all she took.

“Zelandariel brought Death's Grip back from chaos!”

“And nearly destroyed it trying to kill Alessio for the hundredth time! She—nope, nope, I'm not doing this again. I got out of the spire for a reason. Christ, you're almost as bad as Diogo.”

“Diogo was a horrible, vile creature!”

“Then why'd you fuck him!”

“That is none of your concern!”

David inched away until his back hit the wall. Uh oh.

“That fucker called for a hunt on my head!” Jes yelled. And the tunnel was happy to make her voice echo.

The spire mother whip cracked her tail behind her.

“You defied Tacitus!”

“He's just as bad as Zel! Worse! The things he did to Daoka—”

“You defied Zelandariel because of a woman!”

Jes marched up to Acelina and pointed a finger up at her.

“You can't give me that shit! I saw the things you did because you—”

“Zel—”

“Interrupt me a third time, I fucking dare you!” For all Jes's declarations of ‘not doing this’, she seemed very intent on doing it.

Acelina flared her wings out until they pressed to the tunnel walls. Jes did the same.

And somehow David ended up between them. Strange. A moment ago, he'd been doing his best to stay out of the way. Now he stood between them, hands up and playing referee. Clearly God had put him between the two ladies, because no way in hell he'd be stupid enough to do that himself. Ah well.

“Okay! Okay, we’re all stressed. Shit has hit the fan and no one knows what to do. But so far, Acelina is one of the few demons we’ve run into actually willing to talk to us, Jes. That’s worth something, right?”

Jes glared at him. Yeap, his life was now in danger.

“And?”

“And, we know she hit a fork in the tunnel somewhere that way”—he pointed down the way Jes and him had been walking—“and came this way. She’ll know which way we shouldn’t go, if we don’t want to end up at the tunnel entrance she’d flown to, right?”

Jes folded her arms across her chest and tapped a foot on the stone as she narrowed her eyes at him.

“Yes.”

“And Acelina is a spire mother. If we run into other demons down here on the way up, maybe she can convince them to leave us alone? Sounds like she was kind of important.”

“Leave us alone!? She’ll convince them to kill us! She’ll…” Jes frowned as she looked up at Acelina and scratched her horns. “Now that I think about… Demons are stuck on this side of the ravine. No way back to the Spire. The rules are different, and I know a lot of demons want to kill this bitch.”

Acelina folded her arms under her breasts — wowza — and closed her mouth, turning her entire face and head into an onyx mask he couldn’t read at all.

“I am not that despised.”

“You shitting me? You’re that evil step mom everyone hates.”

“I see you continue to watch the scrying pools with obsession.”

Jes’s tail swayed behind her at a frantic pace, like an agitated cat.

“Thing is, Acelina isn’t just screwed because she can’t take care of herself. She’s screwed because other demons will see a spire mother and think free meal, with no repercussions because no one can even get to the Death’s Grip spire anymore. Usually, zotiva are off limits because they’re always in the spire, and under the spire ruler’s protection.” Jes laughed and pointed a claw at the spire mother again. “Lot of demons want a piece of that, for a whole lot of reasons, Acelina especially because she was such a bitch.”

Acelina snarled, showing her big scary shark teeth again, but otherwise didn’t retort. Jes had her.

“Okay,” David said. “So, how about we don’t be one of those assholes, and at least work with her until we’re out of the tunnels?”

“Give me one good reason.”

“Because—”

“And if you say giant tits, so help me god I’ll fucking throw you into that void that wants you so much and lie to Daoka about how you died.”

David winced, squirmed, winced and squirmed, and shrugged. Acelina tilted her head.

“She didn’t attack us,” he said. “She doesn’t have Zel anymore. She lost her home. She knows the way out—”

“She knows whether to take a left or right at the next fork. That’s it.”

He shrugged again. “Okay, let’s do that, and then we can figure out what to do after?” Slowly, he looked up at the ridiculously tall demon, and made a wide turn with his eyes to avoid looking at her breasts and pierced nipples. “How about it? Friends, for at least a little while?”

Acelina sighed, hooked her wings to her shoulders and neck, classic cape style, and let her arms droop.

“I have no choice.”

“That... is true,” Jes said, doing the same. “She doesn’t have a choice. She’s kind of... hopelessly fucked without us. Without me.” The growing grin on the gargoyle’s face was positively evil. “I admit, I kinda like that.”

Acelina lifted a hand and showed some of her long claws. Damn long.

“I am not as weak and useless as you think I am.”

“Sure, sure.” Laughing, Jes gestured ahead, to the path Acelina had come from. “Fine, you can come, but you’re going first. I’ll use you as a shield if we get ambushed.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“You think? ‘Cause I’d love—”

“Ladies, ladies.” David put up his hands. “I’ll take any opportunity I can in Hell to find some demons willing to talk and not fight. Seems to be rare.”

“It will be,” Jes said, “now that half of Death’s Grip is cut off from the spire, our half. The Gorzen Mountains are gonna turn into a clusterfuck with Diogo trapped on the other side of the ravine, if he’s

alive.” She drew a cross over her heart and set both hands together for a second. Fake praying. David smiled. “Tacitus and his Gazra Crag on the other side of the canyon, counter-clockwise. We’re stuck on the other side, clockwise from the spire, with the Gorzen Mountains now without a leader, and Domicela and the Geeraz Tombs in our way.”

“In your way?” Acelina asked.

David opened his mouth. Jes covered it.

“None of your business, bitch,” Jes said. With Jes covering his mouth, he didn’t get to make a poking comment about how Jes was the one who brought it up in the first place, or how she’d given up the information that the void had come for David and Mia. Probably for the best.

“If you’re leaving Death’s Grip and heading toward the Grave Valley, you will have to deal with Domicela if you are caught.”

“Yeah, and?” Jes asked.

“And, Domicela and I are friends.”

Jes shook her head. “No one’s your friend.”

Which, of course, earned an annoyed growl from the tall demon, and an eyeless eye roll.

“Regardless of what you think of me, I did my duty for the spire and did it well. I helped Zel when choosing a bailiff for the Geeraz Tombs, after all. I suggested Domicela. She owes me.”

Sighing, Jes lowered her hand from David’s mouth.

“Okay, she has value. Assuming she’s not lying.” Jes gestured toward the tunnel. “You’re still going first, tall-ass bitch, and if you so much as look at me funny, I’ll leave that giant ass of yours behind. Okay?”

The slow, deep, inward hiss from Acelina was all too familiar to the sounds Mia made when she had to swallow her anger.

“Very well.”

“Awesome,” David said, smiling at the two of them.

They parted, Acelina walked forward, and their journey continued, this time with a nine-foot-tall demoness taking the lead. Ten, if you included the horns. So damn tall, and she walked like a fashion runway model, high heels included considering the hooves and long legs. Long, curvy legs, topped by a huge, perfect ass, and—



“David! Stop it!” Jes whipped him in the ass with her tail, and again his leather skirt saved him a lash. “Stop thinking horny thoughts.”

“He has the strange aura the other had,” Acelina said. “Can he also read the ancient language?” Jes and David both stopped and looked at each other in the corners of their eyes. “By your reaction, I assume yes.”

“You talked with my sister?” he asked.

“Only a little. She visited the hatching room and pit once, with Kasimiro as her bodyguard.”

“Kas was her bodyguard?” Jes winked at David and laughed. “That sarkarin was smoking hot.”

“I hope he lived,” David said. “He fought the rider. I didn’t see what happened. That vratorin Adron seemed to know Mia pretty well, and he was fucked up, too. And Mia…” Well, there went the horny aura, now replaced with a nice blanket of doom and gloom.

“Hey, we’ll get her back,” Jes said, and she again hooked a wing around his shoulders.

“We don’t even know where to start.”

“Caera will.”

“Caera?” Acelina asked. “She’s here, as well?”

“She is,” Jes said, snarling at the tall woman. Taller woman. “Caera and Daoka. We’re gonna find them, and I’ll let Caera decide what to do with you.”

“Caera is an intelligent tregeera. She will decide I am worth aiding.”

Jes rolled her eyes and leaned in toward David.

“Don’t trust her, okay?”

“I won’t.”

“I mean it, David. Spire mothers can talk smooth as a succubus and make you dance on puppet strings. And the sin auras they can craft are heavy duty.”

“And we’re not deaf,” Acelina said.

Jes bared her fangs. “Shut up!”

Acelina sighed and shook her head. “As much as Jeskura aggravates me, she is correct. I am… out of my element, out of the spire.” She gestured around at the tunnel, the rocks, the amber veins, and the bloodgrip vines. “I don’t even know where to begin to find food.”

“How’d you get food in the spire?” David asked.

“Simps,” Jes said. “Lot of young demons try to stay on the mothers’ good sides. They have influence.”

David choked on a laugh. The next time they found a scrying pool, he had to ask Jes to show him the sort of shit she watched, to pick up words like that.

“I may be at a disadvantage,” Acelina said, “but don’t be so quick to assume I am useless. Jeskura thinks other demons will seek to eat me, but as she said, some demons strive to stay on my good side. I am royalty.”

“Royalty?” David asked.

Jes fake gagged, one wing still holding David close.

“Spire mothers are very rare,” Jes said, “as rare as tetrads, and all spires want them. Without them, you have no one to vet which eggs are worth hatching, and which hatchlings have earned the right to get out of the pit.” Growling, she nodded toward the spire mother. “Not that it matters anymore. She can’t get back to the Death’s Grip spire, so who cares? I think demons are gonna realize that and just eat her or something.”

“But, we’re trying to get to the Forgotten Place, right?” David said. “Or at least, I am. I—”

Jes glared at him. “Stop telling her everything!”

“Shit, sorry.” Yeap, he was nervous and doing nervous talking. Acelina was imposing. Royalty was imposing!

“You’re trying to get to the Forgotten Place?” Acelina looked over her shoulder and set her eyeless gaze directly at David. “Why?”

“We’re not telling you,” Jes said, and the thumb claw of her wing snuck around David’s head and covered his mouth. “And if you tell this bitch one more thing, I am going to shove some bloodgrip up your ass.”

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It was not a brief trip. Every moment was tense, with frequent pauses to make sure the silence was genuine, and not a trick laid by sneaky demons or Cainites hiding around corners. Every so often, he heard Jes and Acelina take deep sniffs, checking for scents, but so far, nothing.

David was in pain. His body was healing at an unnaturally fast pace, but if it'd taken Dao and Jes a few days to recover from breaking bones, it'd probably take him twice as long to do the same, or more. And every moment he was getting hungrier.

His mind was in pain, too. All that work, down the drain. Over a week of trekking across literal Hell, running through a battle, one giant clusterfuck, and all for naught. Much as it felt good that he knew Mia was alive, she knew he was alive, and they both had the same goal, it sucked the wind out of his sails that the ultimate goal had failed.

And for some reason, his stupid fucking brain could not stop looking at the nine-foot-tall demon in front of him, her amazing long curvy legs, her huge ass and the small tail dangling from above it, and the absurdly tiny waist over wide hips. He'd seen a few succubi in the spire, and they'd all been utterly gorgeous, busty, thin, and very human-like. Acelina, however, was a strange mix of beautiful, and utterly horrifying. The black mask-like face that hid all its features in obsidian, and only revealed her wide mouth and shark teeth when she smiled, was straight out of a horror film.

He kinda liked it.

The many piercings, the dangling chains, the ridiculous massiveness of her breasts, even the way her thin wings hung on her shoulders almost like a nightgown, he couldn't tear his eyes off any of it. And Jes couldn't either.

"If you don't get control of your dick," Jes said, "I am going to—"

He put up his hands and put a few more inches between him and Jes, the two of them still following behind the spire mother.

"You're not doing any better."

"I'm not you. I can turn my sin aura on and off whenever I want, and I can fight one off. Your aura is like this... tingling feeling in the air and in the ground. I can't fight it. And it's getting me all riled up!"

"Please," Acelina said, chuckling. "Any demon would consider themselves blessed to taste of my succulent body." Despite also having an apparently angry disposition, Acelina was nothing like Jes. She had a bit of that haughty attitude about her that fit the royalty title she claimed.

“You let Diogo touch that body.”

Acelina hissed, but looked ahead and kept walking.

“A mistake, but Diogo is also the strongest devorjin in Death’s Grip.”

“And a fucking asshole who killed my friend for no reason.”

Acelina shrugged. “I know little of what he’s done since becoming bailiff of the Gorzen Mountains. I only know of your tiff with the demon due to Tacitus, and his pursuit of the riiva.”

“Oh shut up,” Jes said, and she dug her talons into the stones. “David, stop thinking about sex, okay? It’s driving me nuts. Cover your eyes if you have to.”

“Sorry. Sorry.”

With a chuckle, Acelina turned around, and cupped her breasts. Bounce. Jiggle. Even while dark red and firm, they still had enough mass to conform to her hands and ripple. He could only imagine what they’d be like if she got aroused, skin reddened, and breasts softened. The way they must feel—

Jes poked him in the ribs.

“Ow! Okay! Jesus fuck.”

“Acelina,” Jes said, waving a wing at her, “could you fuck off?”

“I was merely curious. He is like the other unmarked, incapable of controlling his unique aura, and putting every nearby demon into a near sexual frenzy.”

“Mia did that?”

“Of course. Wherever she walked, soon demons devolved into orgies of bliss. Mia herself spent several nights being ravished by Kasimiro and Adron. At the same time.”

And like someone sucker punched him, thoughts of sex went out the window.

“Same time?”

Acelina grinned a big, shark’s grin, white teeth terrifying and beautiful against the pure black backdrop of her face.

“It is a wonder a tiny creature like her did not pop, taking both those men within her together at once.”

David put up his hands. “Okay, okay. Thanks, yep, got it.” He knew Mia had a big sex drive like him, and who knew what weird things her afterlife body was doing if his was giving him a giant dick. Thinking about her having sex hit his sex drive harder than an ice-cold shower.

Acelina chuckled. Even Jes laughed.

“Finally, some relief from that aura,” the gargoyle said. “Okay bitch face, keep going.”

“I cannot.”

“And why not?”

“I do not know which way to go.”

Grumbling, Jes walked past Acelina into the curving tunnel ahead. They’d already taken the turn at where Acelina had said she’d come from, so now they had to go on Jes’s skills. She took a deep breath of the air, squatted down over various bloodgrip vines, and poked her head around each tunnel corner for a few minutes.

“This way,” Jes said, and she gestured for Acelina to go first.

The huge demon grumbled, but went ahead.

“I should be—”

“I’m not letting you walk behind us. We run into trouble, you’re the first to get screwed. And I don’t trust you to not stab us in the back.”

“I would not stab you in the back.” Shrugging, Acelina marched on. “I would arrange for you to be crushed by a boulder, or I would send a host of demons to do my bidding and rip you asunder.”

“Listen to this bitch. ‘Rip us asunder’.” Jes chuckled as she made literal air quotes with her claws.

David sighed and followed behind them. Maybe it would be a good idea to just leave Acelina behind once they were out of the tunnels? At first he’d thought maybe she needed help, and because she seemed willing to talk, he was willing to give it. Now he was getting serious evil vibes. Evil queen dominatrix vibes. Which, sure, were hot, but now that he was thinking with his brain and not his dick, evil queen vibes were probably not vibes he wanted to keep around.

But she knew the bailiff Domicela, someone they might have to deal with. And she was a spire mother, someone important, or at least wanted. Jes was right. Let Caera decide.

The tunnel grew dark. Twisting and turning, it grew low, too, and Acelina frequently had to duck to keep her huge horns from hitting the ceiling. Jes walked with a forward leaning posture counter-

balanced by her tail. Not as much as Caera when she stood upright, but enough to give her a bit of that dinosaur look. Acelina walked like Daoka, completely upright, with her thin tail hanging straight down behind her. Unlike Dao, she also made sure each step was a full-on catwalk. And from the increasingly haughty attitude, he had to assume it was on purpose.

She was going to trip and break her ankle, at this rate. And each step was announced. Clop. Clop.

“Acelina,” Jes said, “walk quieter. If you don’t learn how to live outside the spire, you’re going to—”

“I fully intend to make it back to the spire, eventually.”

“Ha, yeah well, that’s a nice thought and all. But you saw that ravine when it was done growing, right?”

“I... did not.”

Jes snorted. “It’s fucking huge. Cuts clear across Hell, and I can’t glide across it, let alone you. So unless the spire can repair Death’s Grip somehow, you’re fucked unless you make the trip around the donut.”

“If what you say is true about the ravine, and Zelandariel truly is dead”—David did his best to not flinch at the weight in her voice—“then perhaps I will find a new home with Azailia.”

“Dump Zel and go for Azailia instead? Rich.”

“Are you implying I—”

“You never really loved Zel. You just wanted more power, and—”

Acelina spun around, flared her wings, and took a swing at Jeskura with her claws. She did not go for a backhand or a punch. She tried to claw out Jeskura’s throat.

Say one thing about Jes, she was great at fighting. She jumped back instantly, leapt back in after the swing was over, and went for Acelina’s gut.

“Jes!” David yelled.

Jes stopped mid swing, claws inches away from raking Acelina down her exposed side. Acelina knew it, too. With a slow, deep snarl, Acelina slowly stood back up straight, eyeless face aimed down at the gargoyle, wings flared until they hit the tunnel walls.

“You’re lucky David’s an unmarked,” Jes said.

“Am I?”

“Yeah, you are. He’s nice, and fuck me, for some reason I kinda like keeping him happy.” Jes stepped away from Acelina and gestured ahead. “Keep walking.”

Acelina aimed her obsidian, blank face at David, mouth closed so her whole head was a black void.

“He wants to keep me alive because I can prove useful. Nothing more.”

“Nah. He wants to keep you alive because he feels bad for you. You fell out of your precious spire, can’t get back, your so-called love is dead, and you can’t survive on your own out here. Sure, you’re useful, and that’s why I didn’t kill you before, at least until Caera says to. But right now? Yeah, David just feels sorry for you. Poor dumbass just can’t help it.” Jes stepped back, stood beside David, and gestured ahead down the path again. “Get walking.”

Acelina half turned, looked back to David again, and stood there for a couple seconds longer than necessary. She was thinking, but her mask-like face was impossible to read, even for Mia. An opaque black mourning veil would have let him see more.

But, after some unknown internal debate, Acelina clicked a few times in her throat, and resumed the march.

“Yeah yeah,” Jes said, half chuckling.

“What’d she say?” David asked.

“Nothing.”

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~~Mia~~

The hellquakes had done more than rip a canyon through Death’s Grip. They ruined the tunnels, filled them with big rocks, and made the journey a gigantic pain. Mia had been concerned maybe they’d winded up in the hatching pit tunnels, but a lack of demons — and skeletons — suggested they had not.

Vinicius walked ahead of her, still holding the hole in his side, but no longer bleeding from his wounds. Zel’s heart probably helped heal him, but he was still pretty fucked up. He needed to eat again, and they both needed rest. Her brother definitely needed to eat, too, to heal all his injuries.

Poor guy. She'd never seen him hurt so bad, and even with all those wounds, he'd managed to keep holding her. Would he see things when he ate a heart? Probably. Whatever was strange about them, they both seemed to have what the other had.

That gargoyle Jes was pretty, though. Angry and loud, too, something David probably appreciated. He hated indirect, subtle women. Was he fucking her? Probably, if he had the same aura issue Mia had.

She cringed and wiped the mental image of her brother having sex from her mind. What she needed was a talking topic, to distract herself. Anything to get her mind off Hannah.

“Think the hatching pit tunnels got exposed to that canyon? The spire mothers told me about how the spires birth too many eggs, so they put good eggs into the pit and let them fight to survive.” She shivered and rubbed her arms. “I can imagine how bad that'd be, if they're strong enough to climb the canyon wall. There are lots of demons around in Death's Grip, but not so many you can't avoid them. Imagine if it was just... swarm of demons, everywhere, all the time?”

Vinicius said nothing.

“Think Adron or Kas survived? You burned Adron pretty bad, but I think he'll survive. Think he'll heal? I don't know how much demons can heal from their wounds. Like, your shoulder spike. Will that heal?”

Vinicius said nothing.

“Kas though, he was fighting the rider, and after seeing what the rider did to Diogo, and to you”—she gestured to his arms—“I'm terrified he might have... died. God, I hope not. He and Adron, they...” If she'd been back on the surface, back in her normal boring awesome life, losing her virginity the way she had would have been so ridiculous, so unbelievable, so dreamlike, she'd have spent a month trying to accept that it'd actually happened. Plus, lots of angry yelling at them for doing that to her without her permission. Plus, lots of feeling very torn about it, and the two men.

She'd spent sixteen days as a ghost before coming to Hell, and now had over a week in Hell herself. Maybe she'd just become desensitized to absurdity, with all the orgies she'd seen and other craziness. Even so, she wanted Adron and Kas to be alright. They'd been nice to her in their own ways, even Kas. And now Adron didn't have Hannah anymore, so he'd be super sad, and... and...

She sniffed, shook her head, and wiped her nose. The look in Hannah's eyes lodged itself in her mind and refused to go away, the confusion on her face, the moment of realization. She hadn't expected to get hit. She didn't mean to die. She didn't... She didn't...



Mia stopped walking, clenched her hands into little fists at her sides, and bit down a sob. But another one followed it, and another. Soon, she was crying, and she stared down at the cruel rocks beneath her feet as her vision blurred.

Vinicius said nothing.

“Asshole,” she said, and she sat against the tunnel wall. Hannah’s eyes met hers, filled with surprise before looking for Adron’s. Only at the last second did the poor girl understand what was happening. And then she died. Died, and fell next to Mia.

Vinicius stopped. No way he cared about her. He was just stopping because he couldn’t go far ‘of his own will’, according to the stranger. Whatever. He wasn’t allowed to attack Mia, so she could sit down and cry her damn heart out if she wanted.

“Hannah didn’t deserve this. Any of this.” She gestured around at the dark tunnel and its few amber veins as if it represented all of Hell. “Yeah, she did some bad things, but no one deserves to get tortured like remnants do! And Hannah didn’t deserve 666! Now she’s going to be a remnant, and die so many more times! Horrible, painful lives and deaths, and she didn’t deserve that! No one deserves that!”

She planted her forehead against her forearms, arms draped across her raised knees, and cried. She heard no demons, no remnants. The tunnel was nothing but stone and rock, and might not even take them topside. How would they get out? Go back to the canyon wall and climb? Could Vinicius even make that huge climb back up?

She didn’t care about any of that right now.

“Hannah wasn’t the same person anymore! She’d changed. But Hell doesn’t care about any of that. That’s not fair! She shouldn’t have to suffer! This place is stupid! I hate it!”

Vinicius said something.

“Why do you care?”

She lifted her head from her arms and stared up at the enormous monster.

“What?”

He shook his head slightly, hand still on his gut.

“Why do you care about a betrayer?”

“You saw what she did! She saved my life! She saved my life, and she didn’t think she’d die doing it. It was a horrible accident. And now she’s got to die so many times, just because she drank some of Adron’s blood! Because she was scared and didn’t want to die in Hell! And she died anyway!” Mia covered her eyes with her palms. “That’s not fair!”

She hadn’t cried, properly just sobbed her eyes out, since she’d died. Since before she died. She’d cried a little since arriving, a few times too, but not like this. The last time she’d cried this hard was because of a sad movie a few months ago, a full on wailing noise that made her sound like a firetruck.

Vinicius said nothing. She didn’t know if that was a nice or bad thing about him. Other demons would probably make fun of her for doing something as crazy as getting emotionally wrecked by someone else dying. If she herself died, sure, that’d be worth crying about, but other people? Who in their right mind would care about someone else dying?

She would. She fucking would and she couldn’t help it, god damn it.

“Now she’s got to die a whole bunch of times, just to... to... to what? Go back to this tower or whatever? This thing no one even understands?” She wiped her eyes, but new tears drenched them and she gave up. “I just... I can’t... It’s not fair.”

A quiet, long, heavy rumble flowed out of the colossus beside her.

“I’ve been locked in a spire dungeon for... I don’t know how long.”

“Probably a couple centuries,” she said between sobs.

His next rumble was a lot louder.

“And the surface has grown this soft in that time?”

She got up, marched up to the giant, and reached up so she could poke him in the bottom of his stomach, the highest part she could reach.

“It’s called empathy! What would a murdering asshole know about it? Nothing!” Clenching her fists tight, she took a deep sniff and wiped her eyes again. Not so quick to get blurry again, this time. “I don’t belong here, in Hell! I care about people! And I’m not going to let this horrible place change that!” She poked him again, harder. “And I’m not going to let you change that, either! I’m sad because two guys who liked me might be dead, and are both at least very hurt. I’m sad because me and my brother are separated again and I don’t know if he’ll be okay. I’m sad because my friend died saving me, and... and... fuck off! Fuck off and fuck you!”

She glared up at him, knowing damn well she probably looked ridiculous with soaked, swollen eyes. She didn't care. It mattered that she get this across to him, that he take her seriously, that he understand.

But, he didn't understand. He stared down at her, like a statue. A bleeding statue.

Heavy silence followed, and the painful realization she wasn't angry at him, but at Hell. Okay, not entirely true, but mostly true.

"C... Come on. Let's keep going, and maybe find you something to eat." She wiped her tears and nose again, and marched on.

Vinicius rumbled, and set a hand on her shoulder. She froze like someone had just stabbed her in the spine with a giant icicle. Leash? Hello, leash, save her please?

But Vinicius didn't hurt her. He held her still until he was ahead of her, and took the lead.

She took a deep breath and did her best to slow her heart rate. That felt dangerously close to dying. She wasn't even sure the necklace worked if she was the one using it, and not Zel.

Vinicius marched on, leaning forward slightly with that dinosaur posture, giant tail behind him gently swaying with each step. A few drops of blood hit the stone.

Mia sighed and jogged up to his side, or at least beside his tail. Still a bit behind him, in case any demons jumped around a corner.

"Okay, I feel better. I can talk now."

Vinicius said nothing. He did grumble again, though.

"Not about... about empathy and stuff. I mean, about what we're gonna do." She waited for a response. None. "That woman in the armor, you believed her, and after everything that just happened, I guess I have to believe her, too. That means I have to get across Hell to the Forgotten Place. And of course, that woman didn't give me any hints on how to do that."

"If I tell you, will you release me?" Finally, dialog.

"Um, sorry, but not until we actually get there. I need to get to my brother, and apparently save the world."

The strangest sound came out of Vinicius, one she never expected. A quiet chuckle.

"You should have lied to me."

"Lied? About releasing you?"

“Yes. Lied and tricked me.”

“I... probably should have done that.” She squirmed and stared down at a spot of Vinicius’s blood on the ground as she walked over it. “I suck at this.”

“You do. But you killed Zel. And freed me. I will help you, for now.”

She frowned at the big bastard’s back. Damn, that was a huge back, absolutely covered in giant spikes.

“Not because of the leash?”

“I am bound to you. I cannot walk away from you. I cannot attack you. You can hurt me whenever you wish.” He glanced over his shoulder at her. “You think that’s enough to break me? I resisted Zel for centuries.”

“So... what? You’ll sandbag in protest?”

“Sand... bag?”

The cultural disconnect was going to be a problem.

“It means you’ll sit down and do nothing. You can’t walk away from me, but we saw with how far away I got from you when you were on the other side of the ravine. So apparently, I can walk away from you without setting off the leash. And you’re saying even if I use the leash and hurt you, you’ll resist and keep sandbagging anyway.”

A slow nod.

“Well, I don’t want to use the leash. Please don’t make me.”

A rumble.

“But,” she said, “I once I get to the Forgotten Place, meet up with my brother, and... save the world. Ugh.” Just saying it was enough to make her want to puke. “Then, I’ll release you. And this won’t be like Aladdin. I’m not gonna—right, you have no idea what that is. I’m not gonna back out on my word, because as far as I’m concerned, demons do what demons do, and just because you have a very demony, violent history doesn’t mean I should use that as an excuse to make you a slave.” She didn’t bother waiting for a response this time. “So, how do we get to the Forgotten Place?”

“Unless Hell has changed, False Gate.”

“False Gate? You mean, where the vortex is?”

Vinicius nodded. Even the nods were subtle, like a big nod might shatter his stoic demeanor.

“How far is that?”

“We journey counter-clockwise.” Well, at least he knew what a clock was. “We cross the Black Valley, and Angel’s Spine. Then we deal with False Gate.”

“The Black Valley, then to Heaven’s Tears, and then to the Unholy Lands.”

Vinicius stopped and looked down at her. “What?”

“It’s the real names. Black Valley’s right, but Angel’s Spine used to be Heaven’s Tears. False Gate used to be the Unholy Lands.” She smiled up at the beast. He tilted his head to the side slightly. “I wasn’t lying. I can read the ancient language, and Zel showed me Lucifer’s book and it showed me all these symbols and runes and stuff. The real names for the provinces were one of the things it showed. The Forgotten Place is really Frozen Heart.”

He rumbled slowly, digesting the information, before resuming the march.

“If your brother is to meet us, he must cross the Grave Valley, the Scar, the Red Pits, and the Navameere Fields.”

“That... sounds further.”

“Almost twice as far.”

“Oh god.” She threw up her hands. “Oh god! He might not make it! I might get there before him, and have to do this without him! I might—”

Vinicius snapped a hand out, and she jumped back. His palm collided with the wall, and the beast stumbled forward. Each step earned a drop of blood, and one of his raptor feet left a big bloody footprint.

“Oh god. You okay? Sit down. We start the trip tomorrow.”

Shaking his head, Vinicius pushed himself off the wall, and kept walking.

“I will heal.”

“Yeah, and you’ll heal faster if you sit down.”

“I need food.”

“Yeah, I know. But you ate a few hours ago, so you should still have some of that in the gut, right? It’ll heal you over the next few days, from what Adron told me.”

He rumbled, but sure enough, he only got a few more steps before stopping.

“Twilight will be here soon.”

Twilight meant hellbeasts on the hunt. Would goorts move around in the tunnels? Or maybe some really scary stuff?

“Alright, let’s keep moving until we find a good place to stop?”

After a few seconds, she got a nod out of him.

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They didn’t find a good place.

Vinicius confirmed they weren’t in a hatching pit tunnel, and based on the bloodgrip vines and the upward tilt, he figured they’d run into some forks that’d eventually lead up. The tunnels were networks, intersecting with each other and creating a maze. The only way to figure out how to get around was to either memorize the maze, or follow a combination of the bloodgrip, and your nose. She couldn’t smell anything other than rocks and blood. Naturally, Vinicius refused to elaborate.

The best place to rest they found was a sort of dip in the wall, a shallow alcove maybe twenty feet deep and wide. No bottleneck, which was bad. A bottleneck was easy to protect.

Vinicius tried to be silent, but as he sat down, more rumbles escaped him. And blood.

“Are... Are you sure you’ll heal? That hole—”

“Will heal.” He glared at her for a few seconds before his gaze settled on the large alcove opening. “Two hours. Then sleep.”

“Two hours? Until twilight is gone?”

He nodded, and his eyes flickered to the amber veins on the rock walls. The spire had them, too, and they dimmed and pulsed gently during twilight hours. They stopped pulsing at night.

Sleep in Hell was oddly mechanical. Once it was officially night, all she had to do was close her eyes and flip a switch in her head that said ‘sleep’. She could do it for eight hours, or ten, or even twelve. It wasn’t possible to do during the daytime.

Around two hours of twilight at the beginning and the end of each day, halfway through each marking the beginning or end of a day or night cycle. Strange how Hell, the afterlife, a place where emotion and intent had real impact, had such an inorganic approach to day and night, sleep and waking.

“Why is it like that?”

Vinicius, dragon snout still pointed toward the alcove exit and the big tunnel path, aimed his one visible eye toward her. And said nothing. Of course.

“No one knows why people in Hell don’t dream, right? Fine, I get that, that’s a surface-only thing. But, why does Hell follow this strict day and night cycle? Day and night on the surface is just a function of a spinning planet rotating around a star. And depending on where you are on the planet, the whole day and night thing stops existing entirely for big chunks of the year.” She gestured up to the gently pulsing amber veins along the cave walls. “But here, it’s a perfect twenty-four hours or something, and the day and night come at the exact same time, every day? It never changes?”

Vinicius rumbled.

“So, what’s up with that? Why does the afterlife even have night and day?” Symbols flowed up from her memory and danced along her eyes. Day and night, and something else, something her brain couldn’t grasp. Off, and on? Ebb and flow? Back and forth? Action and inaction?

Chains connected the symbols to something else, some sort of bedrock at the base of her thoughts. Other symbols were connected to it, too, things like life and death, and causality. Causality? What’d that have to do with the others?

Vinicius said nothing. Thankfully, there was a pebble nearby, and she chucked it at him. At least that got a noise out of it.

“I don’t know why.”

“But you’re a child of Belial. A, uh, ragarin. You’ve been around for a long time, right?” She waited. No response. “Hundreds of years, I bet.” No response. “More? Thousands?” No response. “Tens of thousands?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know how old you are?”

“No.”

Sighing, she got up and stood beside the demon.

“And you’re not gonna tell me, are you?” And of course, all she got was more rumbles. “Alright, fine. Let me see.”

Head still aimed at the tunnel, his dragon eye flicked to her.

“What?”

“Let me see the wounds, you god damn idiot.”

“Why?”

“So I can see if I can do anything. You might get infected, or—infections aren’t a thing in Hell, are they?”

“No.”

“No, of course not. People might actually die in weeks instead of months if infections were a thing. Gotta make sure people suffer as long as possible.” Standing beside the sitting beast, she backhanded one of his four arms. He probably barely felt it. “Whatever, let me see anyway.”

Vinicius neither responded, nor moved his arm. So she did what all women knew how to do. She folded her arms across her chest, tapped her foot, and glared.

Unfortunately, that only worked on boys. Vinicius continued to ignore and defy her, eyes ahead, one hand clutching his gut, the other arms hanging at angles that conveniently allowed him to avoid pressing their cuts against things.

God, he was huge. Even sitting on his ass, he was taller than her. Adron was big, three feet taller than her. Kas was a foot taller than him, an absolute goliath of muscle that Mia had disappeared into when he’d buried her with his arms. But Vinicius was so big, even standing beside him, she struggled to wrap her mind around it. Twelve feet tall, he had to be! His leg was bigger than her entire body.

She looked for the part of her that’d enjoyed that. The part of her that’d been lost to her desire, and had given this colossal beast, this gargantuan demon of power and strength, a blowjob. The heat. The tingles. She looked for the thrill and excitement she’d felt when she’d been this asshole’s target of desire, and had felt his huge cocks in her hands and on her lips.

Nothing. All she found was a cold ache in her guts that made her want to collapse and cry and scream.

“Enough,” Vinicius said.

“I’m not—”

“The aura. Enough. It is cold and unwanted.”

“Oh.” She took a step back and tugged at the white silk still wrapped around her. “Can’t help it.”

“Demons control their sin aura.”



“Yeah but this isn’t that. Adron told me about sin auras and how they work, how demons have to spend energy to make them. Like, flexing a muscle, right? Mine is... it’s like... some part of me starts plucking strings, playing music, and the instrument is... the world around me. I can’t control it! Not well, anyway. It just happens.”

“It’s annoying.”

“Well fuck you, I can’t help it. Like I said, empathy. But so much for getting any of mine! I hope you bleed out and die.” With a loud rumble of her own, a failed attempt at mimicking his, she sat down on the opposite side of the alcove.

“If I die, you’ll die.”

“Then let me help!”

Yelling was not a good idea. It echoed through the tunnel. Anyone within a kilometer probably heard it.

Vinicius shot his glare at her and lifted a hand, but didn’t get a foot toward her before his body went rigid, his head snapped up, and a shot of blood gushed from his stomach wound. Amber light shot through the air from Mia’s necklace, straight to the small chain wrapped around the monster’s throat, and the beast trembled. A heavy, deep rumble cut through his chest, and a gargled snarl caught in his throat.

It stopped. The amber line that cut across the air vanished, and the gentle tugging it made on Mia’s insides stopped with it. Mia sat there, staring, and her eyes slid down the now panting, groaning beast, and the blood that leaked from his side onto the stones.

“You... were going to hurt me.”

The dragon glared at her, and slowly flexed and unflexed his hands and their claws. But, he said nothing. He put his hand back over the hole in his gut and leaned against the wall.

She curled up into a ball, hugged her knees to her chest, and glared at the beast.

“I guess I thought...” She waved a hand. “Fuck it. No point. That woman in the armor was right. You’re just a bloodthirsty monster. You ever do anything other than slaughter and rape? I thought ‘cause, hey, Adron and Kas and Caera, they all surprised me, maybe you’d surprise me, too. Nope. I got a rabid animal on a leash and I should treat you as such.”

And of course she got no response. There’d been a sliver of hope there, much as it hurt to admit, that Vinicius would be better than Adron suggested or the stranger in armor did. Maybe that was just

because of the sexual encounter. Or maybe it was because she was now forced to go on a journey across Hell and she had to rely on this monster to be her companion. Maybe, just maybe, she wanted that companion to not be a horrible demon!

Maybe, if Kas or Adron were alive, and she found them, maybe they'd come with her? Maybe?

Maybe.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~David~~

They found a little alcove to hide in. Much as Jes and David wanted to get back to Dao and Caera pronto, Jes insisted the quakes probably stirred up hellbeasts. That meant danger, like that big snake thing they'd seen.

Unfortunately, the alcove wasn't very large. A bottleneck entrance was a good thing, but with Acelina's huge body, they didn't have much room to sit and rest. But they made it work, somehow.

Jes squatted down between him and Acelina, and glared at the big demon as she cuddled up beside him. Soon, the two of them were sitting, backs to the wall of the circular room, and Acelina sat on the other side, facing them. The nine-foot-tall demon's legs were so long, her hooves reached all the way past David's legs and almost reached his side.

"I'm taking a nap first," Jes said. "David, stay awake and watch her."

"You don't want to stay awake with her?" he asked.

"At least one person with claws should be awake for shifts. Sure, this big-titted bitch can't beat me in a fight, but she can beat a lot of things." Jes wiggled a few times as she got comfortable. "Just yell if she tries to kill you. I'll make sure she dies for it."

"For it... So, you won't be able to stop her from killing me first."

"Nope."

"What if she tries to kill you first? You're the one sleeping."

"I'm sturdier than you. She'll fuck up and I'll kill her. Or, I'll get mortality wounded, but I still kill her. Worst-case scenario, she kills us both, has no one to protect her anymore, probably runs into a

demon who thinks she's worth more as a source of food, and eats her. Or she runs into a hellbeast who won't even think about it." She shrugged, leaned in, and gave him a very Daoka-like headbutt. "It's fine, just watch her. In a couple hours, you can sleep."

Wincing, he forced himself to look at the giant demon. Was she looking at him? No way to tell. Her obsidian head betrayed no facial features, a smooth mask of darkness that covered her entire bald head, and some of her neck. Her big horns looked amazing, beautiful, like a big crown that sat tall and wide.

"Jes..."

Jes was sleeping. Eyes closed, wings wrapped around her and shoulder nudging against David's, the gargoyle was out like a light. One of the few joys Hell offered, easy sleep during its night cycles. And as long as he didn't start yelling, she'd keep sleeping.

"It is just us," Acelina whispered, head aimed at the alcove entrance. "I do not hear any hellbeasts, either."

"Got good hearing?" His whispers lacked the hiss of a demon's.

"I may have lived in the spire my whole life, but only a fool thinks the spire is safe, easy living for a demon. I have killed my fair share, and not merely uppity hatchlings."

"Scary." He did his best to not look at her body and her absolutely ridiculously huge breasts that didn't match how tiny her waist was at all.

"You're not scared of me. That is... frustrating. That strange aura of yours craves only sex."

"Sorry! Sorry. I uh... I guess I like demon women."

She snorted softly, head still pointed out of the alcove.

"You say that word so easily."

"What, sorry?"

"Yes."

"... sorry?" He smiled, hoping to get a chuckle. No chuckle. "Much as I bet you hear it a lot from a lot of souls, it genuinely seems like Mia and me don't belong here, in Hell. We're pretty fucked without demons helping us."

"I noticed as much from your sister. And Zelandariel was hoping to have her aid in the trials to come."

“Trials?”

Acelina managed a shrug. With her wings draped over her shoulders and thumb claws hooked together against her collar, the subtle motion made them shift slightly, just like Jes’s would. Wings were beautiful, and sure, Acelina’s were oddly thin and skeletal compared to gargoyle wings, but still, they looked amazing. And huge.

“You really do have no control of your eyes,” she said.

“Ah, sorry. But hey, at least I was looking at your wings this time, right?”

That got a chuckle out of her. Small, barely more than a snort, but it was something. That was good. Much as he didn’t like to think he was, he knew he was fishing for some evidence that Acelina wasn’t an absolutely horrible cutthroat bitch that’d kill him the moment she had a chance.

“I should be thankful you are as you are,” she said. “But, if Zelandariel truly is dead, and it is because the rider came for the unmarked, then...”

David waited for the inevitable ‘then you’re to blame’ part, but it never came. Maybe she didn’t want to say that part out loud. Maybe she knew it wasn’t a fair statement.

If only she knew the truth.

“Sorry.”

Another small chuckle. “You’re insufferable, and far more passive than your sister.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. She would fight, but for the lack of claws.”

“That sounds like Mia.”

After a heavy sigh, Acelina aimed her blank face at him. When she spoke, only a sliver of her sharp teeth exposed themselves, giving him only the smallest hints of her emotions.

“I am not your friend.”

He put up both hands. “Didn’t say you were.”

“Then why did you stop Jeskura from killing me? Or suggest bringing me along at all?”

“Want the truth?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not gonna like it.”

“Irrelevant.”

Irrelevant. How many times had he said things like that?

“I saw a demon who wasn’t frothing at the mouth full of rage or hunger, a demon willing to actually talk. That seemed like a step up from the demons I saw on the battlefield. Any demon willing to communicate, I don’t want to see die.”

Acelina tilted her head to the side.

“And?”

“And what?”

“And... what is the reason?”

“That’s it. That was the reason. You weren’t a mindless, bloodthirsty monster, so I didn’t want you to die.”

Acelina’s tail slipped up around her waist and flicked a few times until she gently wrapped its tip in her claws on her lap.

“You’re injured.”

He knew where this was going.

“Very. I am thoroughly fucked up. Every breath hurts. Sitting hurts.”

“You need to eat.”

“Yeap.”

“My heart would have provided plenty of essence to a broken human.”

He shrugged. Which, of course, hurt.

“Probably, yeah. I bet it’d have filled me right up, and had leftovers for Jes.”

“Then why not take it?” Her tail stopped swaying.

Sighing, he looked down and put a hand on his heart.

“A little while ago, Caera and I hunted down and killed a few humans. Before that, some humans jumped me, Jes, and Dao. Both times, it was clear the humans were full on willing to kill me, and the demons. No hesitation.”

“Of course.”

“Yeah, well, fuck that. I’m not going to be like that. I’m not like them, the Cainites that killed Caera’s friends, or any of the souls that get sent down here to Hell. I’m not like that, and I refuse to become that. So, hey, if I come across a demon or human that’s willing to talk and not fight, then I am happy to let them live.” His fingers slid down his chest, dragged down, and his arms went limp on his lap. “So far, that’s proving to be pretty rare. Everyone down here is ready and willing to kill each other at the drop of a hat, humans even more so than demons.”

“It is Hell. Your naivety will get you killed.”

“Better that than becoming a monster.”

“Most people disagree, the Cainians the most. They happily kill demon and soul alike, and if they could, angels as well.”

“That’s what Caera said. That the Cainites want to eat the hearts of angels.”

Acelina nodded, and her tail, still on her lap and in her hands, resumed swaying lightly.

“They are but one of the many flavors of vileness you will find in the souls of Hell. And the demons that roam Hell are merely predators of such vileness.”

He tilted his head. “Can’t tell if you’re saying I should be killing all demons on sight, or forgiving demons for being assholes because of circumstance.”

“I... suppose I am saying both.”

His head drifted back and rested against the stone as he looked up.

“My sister and I touched the gates of Heaven, you know.”

Acelina froze. “Truly?”

“Yeah. We tried to cross. Didn’t work. Felt like walking into a wall. All the angels freaked out, and before anyone knew what was going on, the Hell portal sucked us up and tossed us down here.”

“You tell me much. Jeskura would not appreciate that.”

“She’s asleep.” He checked her eyes, and checked them again. Still asleep, but he quietened down more, anyway. “And I guess I wanted the opportunity to... I don’t know, talk about this with someone who isn’t her, or Dao or Caera.”

After a few moments of quiet and contemplation, Acelina gestured for him to continue.

“I landed in the red river near Gorzen Eye with my sister in my arms. We got separated. Some imps and grems found me, and were seconds away from ripping my heart out. They were everything I

expected demons to me. Hungry and happy to kill.” Slowly, he looked back to Jes, and watched her. “Dao and Jes showed up, killed them, and when they realized I didn’t have a number, they were curious. Before I knew it, Dao had adopted me as a pet, and they were carting my ass across Hell.

“And, I guess my point is... my first day in Hell, I ran into demons that fit the stereotype, and I ran into demons that didn’t. Jes and Dao are amazing, and Caera is, too. When I realized that, I also realized I didn’t want to just assume every demon I came across was a horrible monster. You seem alright, relatively speaking. That Adron demon I saw seemed alright. Even that Vinicius guy seemed... well, I’m not entirely sure about Vinicius.”

“You... are like a soul in the scrying pools,” she said.

“So I hear. I mean, to me it’s pretty normal for humans to not want to kill and eat each other.”

“The souls in Hell came from the surface, first.”

“Good point. I guess the really nasty sorts on the surface sorta just blend in, for the most part. Maybe they hide? Maybe I was just blind to them. I don’t know. All I know is, on the surface, if I got into an accident, I could trust a stranger to help me.” He shrugged. Ow. “Maybe that’s just Canada, I dunno. I figure most places in the world are nice like that, on the whole.”

“Truly naive.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, I guess.”

“Most demons will not be kind. If they see reason, or opportunity for a meal with no repercussions, they may take it. I would have.”

“Well, hopefully, after this conversation, you—”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I will not change. Demons respect the powerful, and that is how you control them. Anything else is a fool’s hope.”

Okay, Acelina wasn’t on the same wavelength as Jes and the others, and not willing to change. Good to know. But she was honest about it, too. Maybe she had some things in common with Jes? But he didn’t need his sister to tell him voicing that comparison would be a bad idea.

“You... saw the gates of Heaven?” she asked.

“Yeap. When Mia and I died, we spent almost seventeen days roaming around as ghosts, ignoring the gold light that kept appearing everywhere, beckoning us. Eventually we followed it, and we ended up on the stairs of Heaven.”

“Tell me about it.”

“You care about Heaven?”

“I am... curious. I have spent nearly every moment of my life in the spire, tending her eggs, and the hatchlings that emerge. Demons respect my might and vie for my approval. The world of metal, claw, blood, bone, and death is all I know. It is a world I enjoy, and that Zelandariel enjoyed. But that does not mean I have not wondered about the world above, the world the scrying pool cannot show me.” Acelina enjoyed talking, once she was comfortable.

“The stairs were huge and long, and lined with thousands of angels. Around us were white clouds. The stairs took us above them, and overhead, stars and nebulae and galaxies shined.” Hey look at him, talking smoothly. “Nine islands floated above, gold cities sitting on top of giant clouds.”

He went on, describing Heaven in detail. If Acelina was enraptured, or just humoring him because he and Jes were her only chance of surviving, he couldn't tell. But she sat there, blank face betraying no expression, as she listened to him. And for some reason, he enjoyed talking to her, too.