

~~David~~

Hell was an endless maze of mountains, or at least Death's Grip was. The name made sense in a weird way, as if the mountains had a grip on the land and kept it dead, barren, and lifeless. Did the other provinces even have foliage? All Death's Grip had were bloodgrip vibes, the occasional black metal growth of a skull brazier, or maybe a statue, and some burning bushes, eternally covered in small, dancing flames.

It was beautiful, in a post-apocalyptic, oh-god-everything-sucks kinda way. They came across a tiny lava river, deep in a wide crack in the stone, and David spent a little time admiring how it flowed. It wasn't as hot as real lava, or his face would have burned off just peeking over the crack's edge with how close the flowing liquid was, but that only made it easier to admire.

Supposedly, the amber veins in the tunnels and caves, and occasionally on the ground and outer slopes of the mountains, were filled with the lava. And supposedly, a lot of demons thought maybe the lava was the blood of Hell herself, and that demons strong enough to breathe fire — hellfire — summoned that power. No way to prove any of it, and with how weird and wonky the rules of Hell were, probably the rules of all the afterlife, did it matter?

It mattered to him. It mattered to the weird runes floating around inside his mind. Hell was in the runes, swirling around another rune that represented the 'Great Tower', and the lava was in there, too. Liquid fire, heat, destruction, and power. And opposite of it: water, soothing coolness, creation, and... and... something. The opposite of power? Not weakness. Not submission.

He couldn't read the symbol completely, not the lava one or the water one, no matter how hard he tried.

"David," Jes said, "you've been staring at lava for five minutes."

He almost jumped. "Fuck, have I?"

"You have," Caera said. "Stuck in your head?"

"Y-Yeah. Just... yeah." He shook his head out, adjusted his half breastplate and straps, his leather skirt, and fell in behind Caera as they resumed the march. They were up in the mountains again, and following along routes where the mountains connected, like arms connecting at the hands. Which meant the lava had come up into the mountain. A volcano, waiting to explode? Not a big deal in the grand scheme of Hell.

Daoka clicked a few times as she hopped up beside David, and patted him on the shoulder.

“He better be fine,” Jes said. “How much longer, Caera?”

“Last I met Renato, he was deep in these mountain tunnels. A couple days, maybe?”

The gargoyle hopped down from her boulder and landed beside the tiger lady.

“And you’re sure we need to talk to him?”

“We don’t need to, but he’s a friend. A lot of the demons in this area listen to him.”

“I’ve never run into him,” Jes said.

“He stays deep in the mountain, deep enough the horde call can’t reach him. He probably doesn’t even know Zel’s dead.”

Acelina licked her shark teeth as she stepped ahead, and peeked out at the oncoming path. High as they were, they rarely had cover on both sides of them, and instead had to walk paths along mountainsides. At least that way, if the invisible monster attacked again, it might fall off again, and hopefully without triggering an avalanche. But the main reason was, it was just so damn easier to avoid getting ambushed, and maybe spot a potential meal from the vantage point. That was no excuse to do something stupid like get hypnotized by a lava river and forget they weren’t hiding in a cave, though.

“I have heard of this Renato,” Acelina said. “Zelandariel mentioned him, once. She did not like a tetrad in Death’s Grip that did not obey her, but she also recognized there was little sense in having him killed, when he is too passive to challenge her.”

Caera laughed. “Yeah, that sounds like Renato. We’ll find him sitting around, doing absolutely nothing but getting his dick sucked by a succubus or two.”

Dao chirped a few times, smiled deviously, and kissed David on the neck.

“I doubt David will agree to that,” Caera said.

“Agree to...?”

“Suck tetrad dick,” Jes said, licking her lips.

“Um. No.” He frowned at Dao, earning some pouting and shoulder slumping from her, but he stood strong and dug his heels in. “Nope. Not happening.”

“Shame,” Jes said. “I bet that aura—”

All five of them snapped their heads up. Up? They were most of the way up a mountainside. The only things above them were the jagged tops of the mountains, and the fire sky. And movement,

something that didn't match the swirling maelstrom and pouring flames. Three pairs of triangle-like shapes, white against the backdrop of the fire sky, and flapping in tandem.

Nostalgia hit him, and his heart caught in his throat. It was like seeing pigeons again, except white, like doves.

“Angels,” he whispered.

Caera hissed. “Hide!”

“Hide where?” Acelina hissed back, crouching as best she could. “You chose the mountaintops! Now we are exposed!”

Dao clicked fast, grabbed David, and jumped.

The sensation of free falling wasn't entirely new, not since coming to Hell, but the sudden stops that came with hopping onto big boulders very much was. New and painful. Dao held him under her arm, and much as she was strong enough to hold him, her arm didn't make for the most comfy cushion. Each time her hooves met a boulder or rock outcropping on the way down the mountain wall, inertia hit him in the guts and he flopped around like a rag doll.

“Dao—” The wind rushed out of his lungs as another harsh landing drove Dao's arm up into his gut. He tried to lift his head, but the satyr was too fast, hopping down and down as fast as gravity let her. But between violent head bobs that threatened to break his neck, he spotted Caera pouncing down rocks beside them, and a pair of wings that glided past them, big black and red. Easy to forget that it wasn't only Jeskura who could glide, and the much bigger demon woman glided past them all.

David glanced up long enough to get eyes on the fire sky. The white wings above were getting closer.

The ground came at them too fast, and David clenched every muscle he had and then some as Dao's hooves met a large, flat section of the mountainside. With an exhausted squeak, Dao set him down, and he clutched his stomach as he looked around. They'd scaled down a huge chunk of the mountain in moments, and now Caera and Dao both panted, exhausted.

“This way!” Caera said. Panting or not, she dashed forward into a tunnel.

It was not a nice-looking tunnel. Bloodgrip grew around its edges, it wasn't very tall or wide, and even from the outside, there were visible, sharp rocks sitting inside it. The lack of amber veins made it dark. A dark, spooky tunnel, spookier than other tunnels in Hell. Not good not good.

But his legs didn't hesitate. He took Dao's wrist and pulled her toward the tunnel. It wasn't long before she caught up and moved under her own power, but both had to slow down as they came to the tunnel's entrance.

"This is definitely not good," he said, hand to his gut. The inside of the tunnel proved worse than the outside, more bloodgrip vines and sharp rocks waiting for them, and what amber veins he spotted were few and far between.

"No choice," Jes said, and she pushed him in.

"Such a path is suicide," Acelina said. Standing at the tunnel entrance, she bared her shark teeth, eyeless face aimed at the dark path ahead.

"Stay here, then." Jes shrugged, saluted, and disappeared into the darkness.

"Come on!" Caera's voice called from ahead.

"My wings will tear!"

Daoka clicked desperately at Acelina, but, of course, the big demon refused to budge. So, David did the first thing that came to his mind. He gave Dao a push deeper into the tunnel, dashed back out toward Acelina, and grabbed her closer hand. With how tall she was, her hand hung at chest level, and he had to borderline reach up to grab it.

She tried to back away, but he yanked and yanked hard. Before he knew it, Dao was right beside him, doing the same thing to her other hand and clicking up a storm.

"Just pull your wings in tight!" David yelled. "Come on. The chance the angels aren't going to kill me — and you — is next to none, and you know it! Get in here!"

"I will not be—"

Daoka hopped behind her, and headbutt the huge demon in her huge ass, literally. Acelina did not appreciate that, cursing and hissing, but she had no choice but to duck low to keep her horns from hitting the ceiling as she stumbled in. With her leaning forward, it was easier to pull her and keep her half running, half stumbling forward into the tunnel.

Bloodgrip vines were cruel, with sharp thorns almost as sturdy as metal, and they ripped and tore into David's ankles and shins. No matter how good he'd gotten at navigating Hell's environment, this was too much, and he bit down his own curses and hisses as blood trickled down his skin until he felt it between the toes. From the way Acelina mirrored the noises, she was suffering just as much as he was. Demon skin was tougher than human skin, but she was so much bigger than him.

Daoka hopped ahead, took David's hand, and guided him. The eyeless couldn't see in pitch black, but they could still see better than him or other demons. Even so, Daoka slowed her pace to a hurried walk, and made tiny, high-pitched chirps of pain every so often.

"Halt," a voice said from behind. They sounded human, and perfect. And they did not sound like the two angels he'd run into before.

David did not look back. Acelina did, and it cost her a nasty gash somewhere on her body, and a heavy thunk told him she hit her horns against a rock jutting from the ceiling.

"Come on," Caera said. He almost tripped over her tail. "Careful here. We have to go down."

"Down?"

"Down." She grabbed his hand and threw him over her shoulder. Only his familiarity with her back spikes kept him from getting skewered, and he held on as the tiger lady started down a shade of shadow a little darker than others. A vertical tunnel, something they'd have to climb down, with sharp rocks and bloodgrip everywhere and who the fuck knew what at the bottom.

"Come on!" Jes's voice, from below.

Caera went down the hole backward, and Daoka and Acelina stood at the edge. Poor Acelina. The giant demon hissed almost without pause, and no matter how hard she pulled her wings tight to her shoulders, they didn't have the same snap and tightness to them Jes's did. They were long, too, and the membrane flowed almost like a loose silk dress, including snagging on any and every sharp protrusion nearby.

Daoka waited and clicked furiously as Acelina looked down the hole.

"This is absurd," Acelina said. "We are going—"

Daoka pulled on the much bigger demon's hand, chirping Morse code fast, head aimed back the way they came. Whatever she said, it earned a sigh from Acelina, and the giant woman began the descent. Of all of them, she was the least built for this. As long as the demons had something to get their claws on, they could climb pretty much any surface. But each foot down the tunnel, a relatively small hole, was agony for the spire mother.

It wasn't dark for long. Just as Acelina's huge horns slipped past the edge of the hole, the tunnel lit with a blinding flash, and all four demons shrieked. The only thing stopping David from yelling, was the paralyzing awe that ripped through him, as the strange, gold light crashed into the cave wall above

the hole, straight through the tunnel. The sound hit them a moment later, a thunderous crash that shook the walls.

David should have looked away. He didn't. He stared into the gold light until his eyes burned and water dripped down his cheeks. If it weren't for Caera, he would have stayed there, staring, even as the rocks ripped off the wall and fell upon them.

The angels were attacking them. David and the girls had known that would happen, after the warning they'd received, and Caera had talked about the stories of angels and some of the crazy things they could do. But seeing the gold beam of light, almost as wide as the tunnel they'd just gotten through, tear holes into the wall it crashed against? That wasn't what he thought. They'd just barely dodged a death beam!

Acelina shrieked some more. David's eyes adjusted long enough to see some larger, jagged rocks rip holes in her wings, before one of them blocked out his field of vision as it came at him. Yeap, that was going to hurt.

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~~Mia~~

They ducked low into the ravine, but no matter where they looked, they couldn't find a tunnel. Go back, climb the mountain, and go to the tunnel Vin had pointed out earlier? Too dangerous going up and exposing themselves. They had to go down.

She almost called out to the angels, almost waved her hands like she was stranded on a desert island and trying to get a passing plane's attention. But the moment she'd raised her hands, the memory of the other girl hit her hard. The angel, a cold and ruthless instrument, had stabbed the girl through the heart. And as much as the idea of it sickened her, she couldn't deny that the girl in the dream had probably been unmarked, and the angels flying around were out to kill people like Mia and David.

Zel had been right. The angels were on a mission. Back then, Mia thought they might have been her ticket to freedom. Not anymore.

There were at least three pairs of wings up there, and they moved ridiculously fast in a big circle, a little too similar to vultures for her liking.

“They’re searching for us,” she whispered. On Vin’s back, body pressed to it, fingers holding spikes and head peeking up over his shoulder, it was easy to whisper right into his small ear.

Demons had slightly pointed ears, but they were usually hard to see or notice with their big black horns or black dreadlocks in the way. Vin had the horns, but no dreadlocks, and with her lips only a foot from his head, whispering to him was no problem. Good, because each time she glanced up, the angels were closer, and with how uncharacteristically quiet her giant bodyguard prowled along, she was afraid to so much as breathe too loudly.

“Searching for you,” he whispered back. Hearing the colossus use the whisper voice without vibrating his vocal cords was interesting. And terrifying. He was concerned.

“Just me? Not you, a child of Belial?”

He clicked for yes and ducked low around a boulder. Boulder turned into steep cliff face, and Vin crawled on all... sixes, as he looked up at the fire sky while keeping the cliff to his side.

“Angels do not care about me or battles between demons. Now be quiet.”

They were being quiet. Not like the angels could hear them whisper all the way up in the sky. Oh god, could they? She gulped hard and squeezed Vinicius’s spikes harder. Her fear could have been unjustified, but the vision stuck out in her mind like an infected wound, painful and screaming at her to notice it. Do not trust the angels.

If the angels didn’t care about demons doing demon things, though, then why did they show up here, now? Vinicius was a big boy, and with the angels soaring the skies so high everyone below must have been a tiny dot, Vinicius and his size stood out. Maybe they were looking for him, specifically. Maybe they knew she and Vin were on the run together, and knew if they found him, they found her?

Chills ran down her spine. The stories Vin had told her about angels being dangerous had felt so distant at the time, but now that the white-winged agents of Heaven soared above, all she could think about was the vision. That angel had stabbed her, executed her. And now they were looking for Mia.

Vin rumbled, trying his best to stay quiet, but as they drifted through the ravine, the lack of tunnel or cave was quickly proving ridiculous. Death’s Grip had plenty of both, but Hell was a cruel bitch and kept either from making an appearance. With nowhere to go, Vin stayed as low as he could and crawled along the stone, to the point he was horizontal and Mia was lying on top of him as she held on.

Sound drew her eyes up. An angel had stopped overhead and was descending straight toward them. But instead of doing a dive bomb, the angel held their sword in both hands, and was coming at

them feet first, letting gravity do the work while pointing the sword at them. A man. And his sword and wings both glowed gold.

“Vin...”

Vin clicked once, rumbled a heavy growl, and burst forward. Only Mia’s feet pressed to some spikes underneath her kept her from falling off, because the demon broke into a sprint nothing that size should have been capable of. Harsh cracks announced the shattering and falling of rocks as the giant monster’s talons ripped up the stone underneath him, and a warm gust of wind hit her face with the onslaught of speed. Vin stood up but remained leaning forward.

She was riding the back of a fucking T-Rex.

The sound of Vin’s panting and the hammering of his talons against rock disappeared under the explosion that detonated behind them. Mia screamed, but her voice did little better, a quiet ringing in her ears compared to the roaring of destruction.

She looked behind her. God was attacking.

A giant beam of gold hit the rock and stone, ripped it apart, and didn’t stop. It had to be at least five, maybe ten feet wide, and it zig-zagged over the ground, trying to swerve and hit Vin as the demon bounced off the ground onto the walls of the ravine that trapped them, and then back down only to do it on the other side. It was like a satellite laser of doom was chasing them, and lagging behind.

“Vin!”

Vin roared and kept moving, each breath coming in hard like a panting animal. He didn’t look behind him. This wasn’t the first time he’d fought angels, and he had to know what to do, had dealt with giant laser beams of doom before, but each step he drove into the stone as he ran sent a hard jolt of terror up through Mia’s body.

He was running. Vinicius was running.

She looked up at the angel. The laser satellite comparison was too apt. The angel floated there in the sky, not even flapping his wings as the force of the beam coming out of his sword drove his large body upward, armor and all. He was shaking, almost as much as the ground underneath Vin shook, and the roar of the beam drove the mountains to vibrate. Boulders in the distance fell, each announcing their impact with a thunder crack and echo.

Vin bled. Wounds reopened. It’d only been four days since the fight, and he’d only just finally gotten a full belly. He needed more time. But even as his reckless pace tore his own body with its insane



mass, he kept running, occasionally leaning forward and putting weight onto his hands to get over a boulder or out of a ditch. The ravine continued on, giant flat walls of stone on both sides. The angels had waited for them to enter it before attacking. The angels were herding them.

The laser beam stopped. Mia looked behind her and sucked in a hard breath. A new ravine followed them, freshly carved, smoking and smoldering in some places, and chunks of the mountainside on both sides of it fell into the new crack in the ground. Bits of Vinicius's blood littered the stones, smoking from the heat of the beam.

The angel above held his sword at his side, wings flapping, and while the armor covered him head to toe, the posture said exhausted.

“Vin, I think he’s—”

Movement, from ahead. Another pair of wings appeared, dropping in from above and crashing onto the stone in front of them.

Vinicius did not slow down.

The angel held his spear out to the side and slammed his giant shield into the ground in front of him. Again, the ground shook, and rocks splintered underneath the slab of shiny, reflective metal outward as if it weighed ten thousand pounds.

Vinicius did not slow down.

“Vin, be careful! We—”

Vin unleashed a roar, a real roar, a roar she hadn't heard from him yet. She went deaf. Noises stopped ringing in her ear, and instead vibrated through her body. Was the angel in front of them saying anything? It was one of the angels with the big shields she'd seen on the steps to Heaven, and the helmet covered their face completely.

The angel stood his ground and braced his entire body behind the shield with spear pointed in front of him toward the demon. With a jagged mountain on each side of him, the angel was the wall Vin wanted to break through. If he ran up on the sides of the wall, he'd leave himself exposed to getting stabbed by a spear, so in typical man fashion, his brain settled on one conclusion: going through the problem.

Mia couldn't see any other option, either. The angels had attacked first, full intent to kill, so it wasn't like she could talk to them and use her amazing people skills to save their butts.

The giant shield ahead of them glowed gold, and the ravine trembled. Vinicius did not slow down. The angel, almost eight feet tall in their armor, was nothing but a child compared to the enormous demon charging straight at him, but the angel did not move, with massive white wings spread white and glowing. Their armor was beautiful, gold and silver, and the t-slit opening of their helmet showed only a tiny sliver of their face.

There were eyes in there, angel eyes, lit by the glowing of the shield.

“Move! Please!” Mia screamed.

The angel disappeared into the shadow of Vinicius, but the shield erupted in a larger glow that shot upward until it nearly matched Vin’s height. A wall of light. And Vin crashed into it full on with every bit of his weight.

Mia’s weight slammed forward, too, but Vin was upright enough most of it squashed against his back, and she kept a hard grip on his spikes so she didn’t flip forward. Vin hadn’t just hit it with four fists, but his giant horns as well, and the impact shook Mia hard enough her brain rattled in her skull.

For a moment, the world froze, until the familiar sound of glass breaking filled the void as her hearing came back. A giant crack erupted through the gold barrier, from top to bottom, and flakes of gold fell from the semi-transparent wall. Little by little, pieces crumbled away, and the angel beneath them bunkered underneath his huge shield as the gold wall finally shattered.

Vin didn’t run past him. He could have. The angel was brought to a knee, far as Mia could see over Vin’s shoulder, but Vin roared down at the angel and punched down straight at the shield.

Mia half squeaked, half screamed as the angel’s spear stabbed through one of Vin’s fists and out through the back of his hand. Blood splattered, and Vin unleashed another roar that had Mia’s ears ringing, but he didn’t stop. He yanked the hand away, and the spear with it, as he spun around and slammed his tail into the side of the angel.

The huge man crashed into the mountain wall, wings spread, and fell to his knees. Giant, rectangular shield still on his arm, he held out his empty hand, and a small puff of gold filled his armored palm. The spear lodged in Vinicius’s hand disappeared in a tiny flash, and a new spear formed in the angel’s hand.

“Vin!” she yelled, straight into his ear. “There’s going to be more! We have to leave!”

Vin didn’t listen. He charged the recovering angel and slashed down at them with his bleeding hand. The angel blocked it, but Vin grabbed the shield with the same hand and yanked hard, sending the angel toward the opposite wall of the ravine. Only the flap of their wings kept them from crashing into

it, and they brought up their spear in time to stop Vin from charging straight into them again. At least Vin had enough presence of mind to stop, this time.

Another pair of white wings cut across the fire sky.

“Vin! Up!”

He listened enough for that, at least. The first angel with the sword and smaller shield still hovered in the sky, probably recovering, but a third angel swooped in almost straight down. Their sword glowed, and they held it to their side with their shield directly in front of them.

Vinicius dodged.

The world exploded with light.

Motion sickness hit Mia hard as the giant underneath her moved fast, and her body swung hard and into the sides of his spikes. She clung tight and bit down another scream as her legs swung out from under her as Vin bounced off the ravine wall and literally spun around as he jumped off it and landed back in the ravine. Two sets of gash marks ran along the ground underneath where Vinicius’s dug his talons in to bring himself to a stop.

The gash marks were tiny compared to the black scorch mark left in the ground where they’d been a second before.

“Child of Belial,” the angel with the sword said. A woman. “Leave the unmarked and you may live.” Slowly, she got up from her knee — she’d superhero landed for the sword slash — and turned to face them. The sword continued to glow with gold energy, but eventually faded as she pointed the weapon at Vin, exposing the mirror sword blade and its gold and silver hilt and guard.

Vinicius rumbled, heavy enough the angels probably felt it, and he tilted his head up enough to look at the angel still above them. Above them no longer. The man who’d tried to laser them descended into the ravine and landed behind them, maybe fifty feet away.

“Vinicius,” the man said.

Every muscle in the giant demon’s back tensed, going from wood to steel under Mia’s skin, as he turned his head enough to get the male angel in view of one eye.

“Noah,” Vin said, whole body vibrating with enough deep bass Mia’s teeth buzzed in her jaw. “You took my advice.”

Noah? Advice? Oh god, they knew each other. Everyone in Hell was perfectly happy trying to kill Vin, apparently.

“Attacking first?” Noah said, and he took a step closer. “Deplorable behavior, but I had no choice. I knew you wouldn’t listen to reason.” Eight feet tall in his armor at least, his massive wings spread wide, and he pointed his mirror sword at Vin, shield at his side. The shield was half the size of the angel with the spear’s shield, but it seemed to match his sword better. “As Shir said, leave the unmarked, and you may go.”

Vinicius said nothing. He thumped his giant tail on the ground, glanced around, and half growled, half chuckled. Were there other angels? It didn’t look like it, an empty sky save for its unending maelstrom of flame.

Vin wanted to fight. Vin thought he could take on three angels by himself, surrounded, injured, and with a passenger.

Mia stood up on his back spikes enough to wave her hands in the air.

“Wait! Why’re you attacking me? I haven’t done anything!”

“The unmarked must die,” the woman angel said, and she came closer. The angel with the big shield followed beside her, and each step of his boots make a loud clink clank, like he was wearing a couple hundred kilos of metal. The woman’s armor wasn’t so ridiculously thick or heavy, and her helmet left her face exposed enough for her emerald eyes to shine through.

Noah wore the same sort of armor as the woman, slightly lighter, with face exposed, revealing his silver eyes. No, not silver, some other shade and mix of whites and grays, some mineral Mia didn’t know the name of. The color had subtle dark lines cutting through it, mesmerizing, and she stared into the angel’s eyes, lost, as the man came closer with full intent to kill her.

“But, why? Please, tell me!”

“It is the will of the council,” Noah said, and he winced as he met Mia’s eyes. “I am sorry.”

He winced! That was a hundred times more than the angel in the vision had done. But before Mia could so much as comment, beg, say anything more, Noah’s face hardened into a cold, ruthless mask just like the angel in the vision.

“How did you escape Zelandariel’s prison?” Noah asked.

Of course, Vinicius didn’t answer. He slowly turned in place, tail dragging lightly behind him, and he did a slow pan of Noah before doing the same of the angel Shir and her big-shielded friend. Blood dripped from his hand, but also neck and shoulder, deep wounds that would have killed any other

human and probably any other demon. And Vin had only just gotten enough food to really get back on his feet earlier today. He needed more time to heal.

But that didn't register in the damn demon's skull. He wanted to fight.

"You cannot defeat me with a single scouting party," Vinicius said.

Shir scoffed and came closer. "You are injured."

With a deep, hearty chuckle, and a sinister smile on his short, demony dragon snout, Vinicius stood up straighter, and dragged a hand's claws down from his bleeding shoulder, across his chest, and down his stomach. Mia couldn't see, not able to stick her head out far enough to look down at her bodyguard's chest, but from the look Shir gave him, he'd just painted a challenge across his chest.

Vinicius dug his talons into the ground and unleashed his aura. Heat poured over Mia, unfelt but all too real, and her blood boiled in her chest and out into her limbs. She squeezed her guard's back spikes until her fingers ached, and glared out at the angels as adrenaline — or the Hell equivalent — shot through her. The music in her soul didn't play. This wasn't her song. This was Vinicius's battle song, his war cry, and it flooded the ravine.

This wasn't like the aura he'd used before, that all the demons had used when they'd fought in the tunnel five days ago. This was so much stronger. It was thick and heavy, and every breath Mia took forced her to swim above the currents of the surge, or she'd sink and be swept away. Fight. Battle. Rip. Tear. Bathe in the blood of your enemies. Kill.

"We are not demons," Noah said, coming closer. "Your sin cannot break us."

Vin rumbled, and it sounded much closer to a purr.

"And yet you come, without aid."

"Without aid?" Shir asked. "There are three of us."

Vinicius spun toward her, and the spikes on his body glowed as he rumbled deep in his chest.

"There's only three of you."

Shir's eyes opened wide, and she froze as the child of Belial opened his mouth.

The glow came out a thousand times faster than the last time Mia had seen it. Maybe he could use his hellfire breath quickly if he had a stomach full of hearts. Maybe he was more healed than he looked. Maybe—

Vinicius unleashed Hell upon Shir and her friend, and she snapped her wings to send her back away from him. Too late. Flames poured from Vinicius's mouth, and half the ravine disappeared under red and amber colors that roared with power and danced with delight. The flames wanted to destroy. The flames wanted to have fun doing it.

Mia pressed her face down against Vin's shoulder as the heat washed back toward her. Hot air burned her eyes, and her vision blurred. She almost jumped off. The faster she got away from the giant fire-breathing demon dragon and his sin aura, the better, but if she did that, she'd be easy pickings for one of the three angels. Could Vin fight three angels?

Yes, he could. They could. They could fight them. She could—

Mia squeezed her eyes shut tight until the pain went away, and until the voice in her head shut up. That was Vin's aura talking. Don't listen to it. You're not a demon, and you don't have a weapon. Just hold on, and wait.

Her soul listened. Just like she could mute her inner fingers and the strings they plucked, she muted the waves of the aura that poured over her from her bodyguard. Muted was the wrong word. More like, her soul bunkered down, and put up a shield against the waves so they crashed around and past her.

The angels did similar against Vin's flames. Again, the angel with the big shield bunkered down on a knee, held up the huge slab of gold and silver, and yellow light erupted from it as a wall. It blocked off the ravine, and the flames crashed against it, the only thing protecting the woman angel from Vinicius's flames. The stone crackled like pebbles tossed into a campfire, and bits of rock crumbled and fell from the ravine walls as the flames smashed into the gold barrier, and splashed outward up onto the cliff sides until it licked the sky.

This wasn't like the breath he'd used on the rider and Adron. This breath would have killed Adron instantly. Heat buried them, and Mia pressed herself snug to Vin's back as tight as she could as it flowed over them. She couldn't even open her eyes anymore.

Clank clank from behind punched through the sound. Noah was coming.

“Vin!”

The big demon was already turning around, and still breathing flame. It crashed against the ravine wall directly, and Mia buried her face behind Vin's shoulder again as literal flame washed over them, too close to the ravine wall it splashed backward. A second later, the flames washed down the other end of the ravine, and Noah yelled in pain. New vibrations shot up through Vinicius's body. Thump. Thump.

Even with her eyes closed, there was no mistaking the sensation of her giant bodyguard walking, each step taking him closer to Noah as he bathed the area in hellfire.

Ten seconds, or an eternity later, the sounds of thundering flame and cracking rock stopped. The vibration of step impacts stopped. Everything stopped.

Mia opened her eyes. Flames, gone. Heat, dissipating. She sucked in a breath, peeked over her bodyguard's shoulder, and sucked in another as her eyes fell on the angel Noah. He was alive, on a knee, and doing his best to hide behind his shield, but it wasn't nearly big enough. Flames surrounded him, bits of fire that danced on the partly melted stones, and a big triangle of untouched stone extended outward behind him. He didn't have a gold shield wall to summon, like the other angel did, and his wings had paid the price. They were half burned, some on fire, most of them blackened.

"You thought I would be easy to kill, because I was bound and starved before, and am injured now," Vin said, rumbling as he spoke. "Weak. You try to murder a defenseless girl. Vile. You try to fight a child of Belial with only three angels? Foolish." This, was a lot of talking from her bodyguard. "Over two centuries have come and gone. What has Heaven done in that time? How pathetic have angels become?" He took another step toward Noah, and another, and the angel struggled to get back to his feet as his burned wings hung limp.

Boasting, from Vinicius? A pause in the noise of battle and flame told her why. He was out of breath, and his heart pounded inside his chest so hard she felt it through his back.

"Vin," she said. "You should—"

Vin spun around as flapping sounds sprung up behind them, and he slashed out with two of his hands. The angel man with the spear took them both to the shield, but the weight of Vinicius's arms were too great. The angel got knocked aside out of the air, crashed into the ravine wall again, and fell to knee and shield. But Shir had been right behind him, and she glared daggers through her helmet as she soared straight at Vinicius like a falcon coming straight at her prey.

Her sword sank into Vin's shoulder, and Mia squeaked as the angel came to a sudden stop right in front of her. The sword went through the shoulder, all the way through, and stuck out a half dozen inches from the back of it, straight at Mia's chest. Only Mia's sudden jerk back, spurred by Vin's instant half roar, had kept the blade from skewering her.

They stared at each other over Vin's shoulder. Another eternity, trapped in a tiny moment. The angel's eyes, a shiny green that told Mia's brain 'emerald' with an almost magical specificity, cut into

her like daggers. She hadn't tried to kill Vin. She'd tried to kill Mia, and she was going to throw her life away to do it.

The daggers fell away. Shir's eyes faltered, and she looked down.

Before Mia could say anything, Vinicius grabbed the angel with one of his free hands, and threw her to the ground.

"Enough," Vinicius said, stomped on the angel's back, and raked his enormous talons down her back through her armor, earning an ear-piercing scream from the warrior woman.

Noah roared. His blackened wings flapped hard, and the angel threw himself at Vinicius's back. But at this point, it was clear the angels had made a huge mistake. Maybe they'd thought Vin would be a half-starved shell of himself, unable to feed, wounded, and easy prey. But that didn't make any sense. This whole fight didn't make sense.

Vin spun, and his colossal tail struck Noah in the side. Just like the other angel, Noah crashed into the ravine wall before falling to a knee, but some quiet metal clanks told Mia's ears Shir took advantage of the distraction and flapped away. With Vin facing Noah, Mia turned around, and did her best to hold on while looking back at the other two angels.

It was a bloody mess. Vin's talons did more than rip through stone, but armor too, and giant gashes in Shir's armor leaked blood down her legs until small pools formed under her metal boots. Every inch of her trembled, and she struggled to stay standing, sword and shield both swaying. But she held them up them, regardless.

She pointed the sword at Vin. Except, not Vin. She pointed it at Mia again. But the angel with the shield shook his head, and got between Shir and Vinicius.

"They're... not trying to fight you," Mia said. "They're trying to kill me." They already knew that, but seeing it in action was a completely different reality.

Vinicius snarled as he turned his head enough to look at Shir and the other angel.

"Yes, but they will die for it."

"I... I think they know that. I think they attacked you, expecting to die, so they could... kill me."

With a slow, heavy rumble, Vinicius glared down at the angel with the shield, and he flexed his fingers in front of him as if grabbing the air itself. He took a step toward them and reared himself up to his full height. No matter how big the angel was, no matter how massive his white wingspan was, how



big his shield was, an eight-foot-tall goliath of muscle and metal was small compared to Vinicius. Very small.

The angel with the t-slit helmet grunted, slammed his shield down in front of him, and spread his wings as he prepared his defense. Attacking was not his strong suit, apparently, but the girl beside him stood ready to do just that, even as her sword arm trembled, and blood soaked the ground under her feet.

“Noah,” Vinicius said, and he took a step closer to the other two angels, undeterred by the shield the angel woman stood behind. With a deep chuckle, he looked back over his shoulder toward the man who’d started this battle. “You say the council has sent you to kill the unmarked?”

“You know very well where my orders come from.” Noah stood up straight, sword and shield at the ready, despite the blood dripping from the bottom of his helmet. With blackened wings spread wide, he came forward, ready to do battle.

So far, though, the angels hadn’t exactly impressed Vinicius, judging from the tone of his voice. But then again, if Vin hadn’t known exactly what would happen when Noah attacked from above, Vin would probably already be dead, or at least Mia would have been, blown up by a space laser. And in truth, Vin had only done one angel a serious wound so far, Shir, and much as Vin didn’t show it, he had to be in pain. Blood oozed from the hole in his shoulder on Mia’s side, and the same for his stabbed hand. The warm liquid trickled down his back and over Mia’s feet, and she squeezed the spikes harder at the sight of it.

They’d hurt her bodyguard. Badly. The sight of her bodyguard bleeding ignited fire in her, and she had to fight off the rising desire to embrace the bloodthirsty aura pouring off him.

“And that’s all?” Mia asked. “That’s the only reason? Because your boss told you to? You don’t know any more?”

The angels said nothing. They stood, watched, and planned, looking for a way past Vin to Mia, and even as exhausted as Shir and Noah were, they both re-summoned determination to their eyes.

“Please, tell me,” she said. “Please!”

Both angels looked at each other, and both of them winced, only visible because of how radiant and beautiful their eyes were.

“If they won’t tell us,” Vin said, “we make them.”

His words pulled the pin on the tension grenade, and all the angels rushed in. The one with the giant shield came first, shield up and spear poking out from the side, and feet rooted to the ground. Vin spun and hit him with his tail, opposite the spear, and the angel spun to face it in time to take the giant wall of red muscle directly in the shield. The angel slid across the stone like he was on ice, but with his shield's bottom lip grounded, dragged, and tore up the stone as he moved back. He came to a stop just before his back and wings would have hit the wall.

The angel tried to stab the tail, but Vin spun around again and pulled his tail with him, just in time to face Noah and slash down with two of his good hands into the angel's smaller shield. Noah went down, hit the ground on foot and knee, and bounced back up, sword poking straight out from him like Superman flying with his fist up and out. Vin brought up his already stabbed hand to block, only to get the sword straight through it, right up until the sword's guard pressed to his palm.

Vin roared down at Noah as he closed his fingers down on the angel's hand, and squeezed. Blood squirted from the around the blade as Vin clamped down, and Noah roared back at the giant demon as they met face to face. They knew each other. From the look in Noah's eyes, they knew each other well.

Vin spun around again, and backhanded Shir. She'd leapt at their back, sword up and aimed directly at Mia, but Vin smashed her to the side, and only her shield kept the spikes along his forearm from hitting armor. Noah came along for the ride, sword hand still in Vin's grip, lifted his legs, and drove his feet straight into Vin's chest. With a flap of his giant wings, air crashed into Vin and Mia, a hurricane of power summoned by a flash of gold from his blackened feathers, and Vin stumbled back as the angel yanked himself free of the titan's grip.

The angel with the spear leapt in, but didn't fly. He stayed low, got underneath Vin's arms, and summoned a gold light to his shield again, not a giant wall, but something that rooted him. The ground around his feet almost exploded, sinking a few inches around his boots and cracking outward in all directions. Only then did he stab out with his spear and sink the mirror blade into Vin's side. The only reason Vin didn't roar, was his deep panting as he struggled for breath.

Shir took to the air, and Noah followed behind her. Before Vin could turn his aggression on the rooted angel under his arms, Noah dove for Vin's head, and his sword glowed as he aimed the blade and his whole body down like a missile.

Vin ducked in low and slipped past Noah and underneath him. Mia yanked her head in close to her bodyguard's bloody shoulder, and her heart stopped as something ran along the back of her hair, an inch away from her scalp. By the time she turned her head around, Noah had landed on the ground next to Vin's tail, and some of Mia's hair fell in the corner of her eye.

Shir came in after, diving the same way Noah had. Expecting Vin to turn and go after Noah, no doubt. But Vin ignored Noah, even as his old enemy turned and stabbed Vin in the tail, sword glowing yellow. Whatever the angel was doing, it was draining Noah, exhausting him, and the angel roared like he was deadlifting a bus as he swung the sword to the side, cutting through the side of Vin's tail down its length. Blood gushed out and soaked him.

Vin didn't turn to face him. He reached up with his three good arms, and yanked Shir out of the sky. Only when the woman angel was in his hands, her arms pinned at her sides, did Vin spin around and knock Noah aside with his bleeding tail, while stepping away from the shield angel with a back hop. The angel with the shield had no way to pursue, and Noah hit the ravine wall again, hard enough he landed in a slump. But Noah wasn't the goal.

Roaring at the angel in his grip, Vin threw Shir down hard, and again got his giant talons on her already bleeding back. But he didn't rake her open this time. He grabbed her wings instead.

"Vin!" Mia said. "Don't—"

He ripped her wings off.

The following scream turned Mia's blood to ash. White, bloody feathers rained down on them, slowly drifting back and forth in the hot air, before gently landing on the fiery rocks.

"Shir!" the other angel yelled, unhooked his feet and shield from the ground, and jumped toward them. Vin had no choice but to back up to avoid another poke as the defensive angel got between Vin and Shir.

And with a smoothness that was almost a dance, Vin again backed away, turned, and brought his two lower arms down at Noah. Noah got his shield up in time, but now that Vin didn't have to worry about Shir, he was free to unleash his rage upon his old enemy. He smashed two hands down, and two more, using his bad hand and arm as if they weren't injured, and forcing a huge gush of blood from the shoulder wound onto Mia. But it was enough to pin Noah to the ground, buried under his shield. How the angel managed to not get smashed into pulp as Vin slammed all four hands down like hammers upon his shield, Mia couldn't fathom, but Noah, pinned to a knee under his shield, held strong.

Vin spun again. Mia hadn't heard it, but the angel with the big shield came at them again. The moment they had, Vin slammed his tail into him, and the giant gash in the huge slab of dark red muscle splattered blood across the canyon. Vin didn't care. He hit the angel hard, a hit he'd planned, a hit he'd baited, and the angel smashed against the ravine wall again.

Snarling and growling between his exhausted pants, Vin reached down, grabbed the shield angel with two hands, and pulled off their helmet with a third.

“Azreal?” Vinicius said, chuckling as he glared down at the angel in his hands. “This is no coincidence. You came looking for me.” More sinister chuckles. “I am going to enjoy this.” Two hands holding the angel’s torso with arms pinned to his sides meant the angel couldn’t stab back or raise their giant shield, and Vinicius took full advantage. He roared down at the angel’s head, opened his mouth, and raised the angel’s skull until it was nearly between his teeth.

The angel was a handsome man, with tan skin, and short, messy dark hair. Mia met Azreal’s eyes for only a split moment. Purple. Amethyst. And he looked at her with an unknowable mix of exhaustion, weariness, and... jadedness?

No bite came. Vin snapped his head up instead, roaring and turning to look down at the angel. Not Noah. Shir. Crimson dripped from the two stumps where Shir’s wings had been, red soaking over the remains of the few feathers along the back of her armor where the stubs emerged. On shaky legs, she held her sword and shield in front of her, a fresh coating of Vin’s blood soaking the blade, and new blood dripped down the demon’s side.

She collapsed. The energy went out of her like someone cutting the strings on a puppet, and she hit the ground on her stomach. Her sword and shield poofed out of existence, and her armor followed suit, leaving nothing more than a tall woman in loose white silks not dissimilar to a toga, soaked in blood, with pale skin and long red hair.

She tried to get up. She failed.

Vin glared down at the angel, and new malice burned in his eyes. Noah struggled to his feet, but something in his leg didn’t agree with him, and he fell to a knee with a loud groan. He tried again, and again the leg didn’t work. He flapped his wings, but something inside him was broken, and every attempt he made to get up ended with him falling. With how Vin had hammered on him, it was a wonder the man could even lift his shield. His boots had left a small crater from Vin’s hammer punches.

“Azreal, Noah,” Vin said, and he put his foot on Shir’s head. “Remember last time? You deserve this.” Chuckling, he leaned onto his leg, and the angel underneath screamed as his thigh dripped red liquid onto her.

“Vin, don’t!” Mia said, looking over his shoulder down at the helpless, wingless, broken angel.

“They attacked us.”

“I know, but don’t!”

“They tried to kill you. Not me. You.”

“I know! But... but, just don't, okay! Just don't!” She looked at Azreal still in Vin's grip, his drooping wings, and his amethyst eyes. He was confused. She looked Noah's way. Same thing, big silvery eyes showing confusion, and aimed straight at her.

Vin growled over his shoulder at Mia, and looked at her from only inches away.

“These two angels have been a thorn in my side before. They die. The woman dies first. They will know pain.”

“I said no!”

Vin, staring right into Mia's eyes, put more weight onto his leg, and again the angel screamed.

Mia, staring right into Vin's eye, poured her will and intent into her necklace. An amber beam shot out from it, like an arc of electricity, straight into the small black chain wrapped snug around Vin's neck, and the demon roared as he fell to his knees.

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~~David~~

Opening his eyes wasn't easy. Someone was holding his eyelids down with anchors. He stirred, groaned, fought against the heavy weight, and eventually forced them open.

Chirps and clicks rang through his ears, like song birds waking up him up three hours before his alarm did.

No, wait. He wasn't alive anymore. He was in Hell, and the only chirps he heard anymore were from demons, one in particular who had a habit of holding his head on her lap and running her claws through his hair.

Look at that, same thing happening again.

“Dao,” he said, blinking up at her. “What... What happened?” He tried to sit up, but she gently pushed him back down with her other hand and shook her head.

“You lack horns,” someone said, someone haughty, and mean. Acelina. “If you had horns, your skull would not be so easily struck.”

He groaned, louder than he probably should have, according to the memories coming back to him. Right, they were being chased by angels. The angels had said ‘halt’, and then unleashed a gold beam of energy at them. Rock met face. He raised a hand and poked where a new wave of pain said hello, and he groaned again. Sighing, he closed his eyes and melted back into Dao’s touch.

“We’re safe for now.” Caera’s voice. From the familiar sound of claws on stone, she’d prowled over and sat beside him. “The angels caused a cave-in.”

“A cave-in?” he asked. “Are we trapped?”

“Nah,” Jeskura said in the distance. “But we don’t know where this tunnel goes. I haven’t used it, and neither have Dao or Caera. And naturally Bitch McTits hasn’t, either.”

Some clip clop sounds announced Acelina marching off toward the gargoyle, but David kept his eyes closed. A headache was settling in, and the last thing he needed was watching the two winged demons fight. Hearing it was bad enough.

“Look at this,” Acelina said. “I bleed from a dozen wounds!” A pause. “Several dozen!”

“We’re all bleeding,” Jes said. “If you’d spent time learning how to navigate—”

“How could I learn to be smaller than I am?” A loud hiss followed. Not a fight hiss, but a pain hiss. “I am...”

Dao clicked a few times, and the two winged demons sighed, heavy and long. Silence followed, until some stirring in the rocks told David Caera now lay next to him.

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think so. Throbbing in my head.”

“Understandable. You took a rock to the face.”

He nodded, regretted it, groaned some more, and cracked his eye open enough to look up at Dao. Lines of blood ran down from her head and shoulders, and under the slabs of metal armor and leather straps. If her shins were half as bad as his felt, they’d be coated in blood, too.

“You okay, Dao?”

She smiled, chirped once, and ran her thumb along his lips.

“I’ll be fine. How’s everyone else?”

“I took a few scrapes,” Caera said. “Tunnels like this are a pain, but I’ve run them thousands of times. Jes and Dao, not so much, and they’re both pretty cut up. Jes has some small wing tears, too.”

“And Acelina?” he asked.

Caera raised an eyebrow slightly, but smiled at him when Acelina scoffed.

“She’s the worst off,” the tiger said as she nodded Acelina’s way, down the tunnel. “She’s still standing, but she’s pretty torn up. Neither she nor Jes will be gliding anytime soon, and healing wings takes time. Acelina could take a week or two before she can glide again.”

“I will survive,” Acelina said.

Jes snorted, but at least she didn’t say anything.

“Those angels,” David said. “They didn’t hesitate to try and kill us.”

“They probably know what you look like,” Caera said. “Think those other angels ratted us out?”

“Maybe. Can angels lie?”

“Of course they can lie,” Acelina said. “They are angels, not some embodiment of righteousness.”

“I... guess, yeah. Heaven and Hell are a lot more real and visceral than I ever figured they’d be.”

“Very real,” Caera said, and she smiled down at him as she ran the blunt side of a claw along his cheek. “But I get what you meant. I doubt they lied. No, I’m pretty sure the angels just figured out what you look like, or saw four demons leaving the spire with a human and just figured they better investigate. And when we ran, they figured it’d be better to—”

“Shoot first and ask questions later,” Jes said.

Acelina groaned. “Here but an hour and you are already addicted to the scrying pool.”

“Scrying pool?” David asked.

Dao nodded and gestured past Caera. A scrying pool sat nearby, two feet off the ground and maybe four feet wide. Underneath it was a mound of skulls stuck to a wide, smooth, pillar-like rock, creating an artful — if macabre — thick base for the big, shallow pool to sit on. It sat in the middle of the small cave, and the ground around it was smooth. A glance down the tunnel proved more bloodgrip waited to tear up their shins, palms, and wings, but near the scrying pool, it was clear.

It wanted people to come sit, and watch. Sure enough, Jes was doing just that, sitting on her butt with knees out and legs crossed at the ankle. Her tail sat still on the ground behind her, bloody and ripped wings hung to her shoulders, and from the angle, David could just barely see one of her eyes. She was in pain.

“Louder. I want to hear,” the gargoyle said down at the pool.

The scrying pool listened. Noises flowed up from the pool, and while David couldn't see over the lip of it with his head on Dao's lap, he recognized the sound immediately.

"Jes," he said, chuckling, and hissing as the throbbing in his skull punished him for it, "don't watch those new superhero movies."

"Why not?"

"They're horrible and they'll rot your brain."

She gave him a very Acelina-like scoff, smiled at him over her shoulder, and looked back at the pool.

"Think those angels are gonna chase us in here?" David asked. "I mean, use that beam again and punch a hole through... that?" A weak hand motioned to the pile of rocks blocking off the tunnel from the way he assumed they'd come from.

"I doubt it," Caera said. "I mean, I don't know. I've never dealt with angels. Acelina, you're old. How about you?"

"Never directly. But from the few encounters I have been alive for, the angels are surgical and determined. If they believe they saw an unmarked, and if it is their order to kill the unmarked, then yes, they will come for us."

"Fuck," Jes said. "Don't suppose they'll just assume their attack killed us? Like people in TV shows would?" She gestured to the scrying pool. "You know, not double check and stuff?" Everyone looked at her. She sighed and shrugged. "Never mind."

"Let's just be thankful they didn't chase us in here, yet," David said. "Dao, help me up?"

The satyr frowned and sighed, but she helped him up, regardless. And for some damn reason, David gestured toward the scrying pool, and Dao took him to it.

"I think I need a minute," he said, "before we start running for our lives again. Mind if I watch something?"

Laughing, Jes gestured down at the big, flat pool of shadowy, silvery liquid currently showing a movie that absolutely sucked. Blegh.

"Scrying pool, show me..." Fuck, did he even want to watch something? "Show me... my old room, from when I was at university."



It did just that. A blur, a swirl, and nostalgia hit him so hard only Dao and her arm kept him from falling over. Almost three weeks in Hell. Over a month since he'd died. He'd never been much of a smartphone guy, but the computer and the internet had been his life, and they sat at his old desk, silently calling his name. Programming. Video games. Porn. Well, he didn't miss the porn. His new sex life was amazing and was pretty much what he would have wanted if he'd gone to Heaven. But even in Heaven, he probably would have asked to have his room back, and his computer.

He thought small and had little ambition, but was that so wrong? It took so damn little to make him happy, to make him content. But here he was, looking at a scrying pool showing him a live feed of his old bedroom, dark and only lit by the sunlight that slipped past the curtain. Judging by the look of it, it'd been cleaned, but his stuff was still there. A quiet bedroom that would have fit him like a glove. A quiet bedroom where angels wouldn't have been coming to kill him.

Unless they had something to do with why he died in the first place?

"Scrying pool," Jes said. "Show me the hottest girl at David's school, who's also doing something sexy."

"Oh come on."

Jes laughed, and the pool obeyed. Lucy Daniel, tall and busty — by human standards — was taking a shower.

"Think I haven't seen that already?" he asked, and he gestured down at the pool. "I spent the first week of being a ghost spying on this."

"Perv."

He laughed. Jes laughed. Someone else laughed.

Daoka and Acelina both unleashed a couple loud clicks as they aimed their eyeless gazes down the tunnel. And like they'd shot their own lasers into the black, something in the dark squeaked, clicked, and scampered away.

Caera growled, got on all fours again, and started down the path.

"What was that?" David asked.

"Imps and grems."

"We worried about them?"

"No."

“Then, no reason to hunt them down, right?” he asked.

Caera stopped, paused, and looked over her shoulder at him, eyebrow raised.

“I suppose not, but...” Sighing, she came back and shook her head. “With demons cut off from the spire, even if they think Zel is still alive, any demons we run into aren’t going to respect the dueling law anymore. Assuming they were going to in the first place. There’s a good chance anyone we run into is going to fight us.”

“Not everyone,” David said, gesturing to Acelina. “And it’s not like all demons always try to kill each other, right?”

“No, but it’s not uncommon.”

“Then how about we don’t stir the pot unless we have to?”

Acelina scoffed, but instead of throwing some insults his way for being ‘soft’, she tended to one of her wings. Torn, bloody, and full of holes. Her legs weren’t much better off. None of theirs were. They needed a little time to heal.

Dao and David sat down, and David looked back to the pool.

“How about... Scrying pool, show me... a bonfire or campfire by the ocean, somewhere where people aren’t talking.”

The scrying pool did as ordered. There wasn’t even a pause, just instant response and then the noise of popping and crackling wood, and waves hitting sand and rocks.

“Boring,” Jes said, frowning.

“Yeah, it is. S’why I love it. It’s good background noise, for sleeping or working. Listen to it and let the come and go of the sound help you relax.” He smiled at the gargoyle and rested his temple on Dao’s shoulder.

Jes rolled her eyes. Caera sat down across from the pool. Even Acelina eventually joined them, and sat in the typical overly-feminine way she liked, leaning on one hip and both legs to one side. No one said a thing, and all five of them gazed down into the fire the scrying pool had focused on. The scrying pool’s supposed purpose was to make souls miss the surface, but it had upsides, too, and this was definitely one of them.

Nothing soothed the soul quite like sitting around a fire and watching wood burn. The fires of Hell were nothing like it, not even the burning bushes that never really burned. And absolutely nothing in

Hell even came close to the sound of ocean waves. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes slipped by as they rest, recuperated, and listened for laser bombardments by angels. None came, yet.

Movement drew their eyes again. Whoever was in the tunnel, hiding around the distant boulders and curves of the cruel tunnels, they stuck their head out again. Heads. Four heads?

“Begone,” Acelina said, and she flared out one of her wings. Mistake. She hissed and growled, and held the huge thing in front of her so she could inspect it. Yeap, she’d made some holes in the membrane worse, and a bit of blood lined the inner contours of the tears.

Surprisingly, Jeskura didn’t automatically say the opposite of Acelina. She glanced the imps and grems’ way, but set her eyes back on scrying pool instead.

“We worried about the imps or grems saying anything?” David asked.

Caera shook her head. “No. Imps and grems talk a lot, but they forget things, they miss out key details, and they twist the story the more they repeat it.”

“Ah. The telephone game.”

Dao clicked twice.

“It’s a game kids play. You sit in a circle, and someone starts the game. They whisper something to a kid beside them, then the second kid repeats the whisper to the next kid. By the time you’ve gone around the circle, the message has changed.”

Caera laughed, and winced as she clutched her side.

“Uh, not exactly like that. They’re just not smart enough to give the details straight. Or remember them straight.”

David leaned to the side slightly, looked past the tiger lady, and down the tunnel to the creatures in the distance. Four of them, poking their heads up around boulders far enough he could see their horns, and all of them had their wings out. It was hard to see from a distance, but the four creatures looked unharmed.

“They might know their way around,” David said.

“Probably,” Jes said. “But they’re imps and grems. Best you can hope from them is remnant cleanup.”

“Can’t work with them?”

She shrugged. “Sometimes? Hard to predict.”

So imps and grems weren't children so much as they were a simpler kind of demon, less intelligent, and more driven by their impulses. They certainly didn't look like children. Sure, their heads were a little larger relative to their bodies compared to Jes and the others, with bigger eyes to match, but they were more like mini demons, four feet tall.

And just as capable of bloodthirsty murder and violence, if memory served. It was his first memory after hitting the red river, waking up on shore with a bunch of imps and grems about to eat him, and clearly enjoying themselves, too.

"Sure you don't know these tunnels, Caera?" he asked.

"Only imps and grems use these smaller tunnels, with all the bloodgrip everywhere. I'm sure it connects to other tunnels in the area, though, and then I can find my way to Renato."

"Well, those imps and grems look completely unharmed."

Acelina glanced back to the creatures. "And?"

"And, they must be familiar with these tunnels. We can't go five feet without this happening." He gestured down at his shins, covered in cuts and streaks of blood. "Look at them. They got their wings out and everything. No injuries."

"They are pests." With a harsh scoff, Acelina held her wing in front of her and hissed as she ran the blunt side of her claws along the bloodied rips and tears.

"Dao?" he asked.

Dao chirped a few times, tilted her head, shrugged, and gestured to him. Alright, leaving it up to him.

He got up and tested his balance. Head didn't throb nearly as bad anymore. Concussion? In Hell, who knew, but probably not. Wounds seemed to be a simpler concept in Hell, and weird complications just weren't a thing.

Dao got up with him and stayed close as he slowly walked toward the little demons.

"Hi," he said, in a voice a little too close to how he'd talk to a random dog or cat he'd stumbled upon outside on the road. Dumb. He cleared his throat and spoke normally. "Hey. We're—"

"Unmarked!" one of the gremlas squeaked. "You're unmarked!"

He rubbed his forehead and pulled his hair aside enough to show it off.

"Yeah. Heard of me?"

“Heard of girl.” The little creature crept forward. The tunnel was only ten feet tall and wide, with plenty of boulders and bloodgrip everywhere. Somehow, she seamlessly moved around without hurting herself. Imps and grems couldn’t be all that stupid if they navigated places like this without getting a scratch.

He was tempted to squat down, but, again, that’d be treating them like a wild cat or dog, and not the deadly creatures they were. They were four feet tall, but had enough claws and muscle and teeth they could rip him to shreds.

Two impas and two gremlas. The rest of them came forward, each with big, curious eyes that looked less like a child’s eyes, and more like an eagle’s or owl’s ‘is that food I see’ eyes. The closer impa had a few scars on her, but otherwise they were really similar, with shoulder-length black dreadlocks, and random bits of black armor, just like Caera, Jes, and Dao.

Imps were basically mini gargoyles, except their tails ended in spades like a succubus or incubus’s. Grems lacked the tail, and walked on hooves, but were otherwise the same, a couple wings and horns just like the impas, and cute-ish faces that quickly became startling when they opened their wide, scary mouths, not unlike Acelina’s. Combined with their slender stomachs and fit physiques, they were very attractive, like mini Jeskuras, but also a little unsettling, like a swarm of large-eyed piranha.

No guys in this group. Sisters? Weird. Hell didn’t do sisters.

“You know about the unmarked girl?” he asked.

“At spire. Everyone knows.”

“Right, right.” How to play this? He could lie about himself, make up anything, and if the girls were right, impas and grems wouldn’t be smart enough to tell he was lying. Or maybe they were? Being dumb didn’t necessarily mean you didn’t know how to deal with people, or vice versa. Case in point: himself. “You four know these tunnels well?”

“Do. We do,” the closest impa said, fluttering her wings. One of the gremlas came up, chirped a few times, and gestured at David. The closest impa spoke. “Red hair. Freckles. Brother?” Apparently, not so dumb.

“Yeah, she’s my sister.”

“Not here?”

“Other side of the ravine.”

The impa shivered and rubbed her arms as she looked up at him with her big, red eyes.

“Ravine scary. Blackness scary.”

David laughed. “Yeah, you’re right.”

The impa came a little closer. Less than ten feet away, she stood up a little straighter and hooked her wings around her shoulders, cloak-style like Jes and Acelina often did.

“Why unmarked?” she asked.

“I don’t know. It’s a mystery I’m trying to solve.” He gestured past her to the tunnel. “My friends and I need to get through these tunnels. Think you can help us out?”

She tilted her head, red eyes still wide and forever riding that knife’s edge between cute, and predator-ready-to-attack look.

“Can’t go back way you came?”

“No, we’re sealed in.”

“Cave collapse?”

David looked back at the girls, and they all shrugged. None of them thought this mattered, and he could tell the little demons anything and it wouldn’t matter. He wasn’t about to tell them everything, but no point in lying to them, either.

“Some angels attacked, and destroyed the cave.”

The two gremlas and remaining impa in the back hopped forward, and all of them faced each other as they gasped.

“Angels?” one of them asked, mouth open in awe.

“Angels?” another asked.

“Angels!” The first impa squeaked, shivered, and pulled her tail in front of her. Like a girl who chewed on her hair when nervous, she tugged on it a few times and twisted it around a finger. “After you?”

“After the unmarked,” he said. “But, seems like they’re done chasing me for now.”

The girls all nodded to each other. Maybe they knew each other well? He couldn’t tell. Mia probably could have.

“We’re hungry,” the first impa said. “Haven’t found much. Just remnants. Help us hunt?”

David looked back to Caera, earning a groan and eye roll from the tiger.

“They’re just as likely to eat your heart as they are to wait for us to help them get food,” she said, prowling up to him.

“Not true!” the impa said, and she gave Caera a big chipmunk frown. “Not true.”

Not so easily convinced, Caera groaned and shook her head.

“It’s up to you, David.”

“Me? You’re the leader.”

“You’re the one with angels after you.”

He scratched his head. “But, you know... what sort of decisions will or won’t get us all killed.”

She grinned at him and gave his back a gentle slap with her huge tail.

“This is a fifty-fifty. We’ll have to keep an eye on them, and you just know there’s a bunch of imps and grems hiding around. Sometimes they work together, get a swarm going, and it’d be a tough fight trying to kill thirty of the little critters at once.”

Thirty? The piranha metaphor was too apt.

The first impa came closer, close enough Caera could have cut her open with a quick slash, and the little creature stood up tall and proud. Barely four feet tall. David had never felt tall in his life, barely five and a half feet tall, but the little woman in front of him made him feel like a literal giant. She wasn’t just short, but proportional, too, in the same way Acelina was proportional, despite how tall she was. Was this how Acelina felt every time she looked at him?

“We’re... scared, to hunt,” the impa said.

Daoka clicked a few times as she came up beside David.

“Because of the angels?” Caera asked.

The impa shook her head. “No. Cainites!”

Caera stood up on all-fours and growled. The impa dashed away on all-fours too, skittering and clicking, and the other three girls followed her. They didn’t go too far, disappearing around some huge rocks only to poke their heads out a moment later.

“Cainites are in these tunnels?”

“Y-Yes!” the first impa said, still half hiding. “They... They swarmed. Dangerous to hunt Cainites.”

Well, that settled it. No need to even ask. Caera looked back, but Jes was already up and heading her way, and Acelina followed behind, sighing and scoffing but coming, regardless.

“We’ll help,” Caera said. “These Cainian fucks might be the ones I’m looking for. We’re close enough.”

“Help us hunt?” the impa asked.

“We’re going to kill some Cainites. A lot, if we’re lucky. You guide us to them, a good place to ambush them from, help us kill them, and you’ll have plenty to eat.”

The four little devil critters looked between themselves, leaned in, and whispered to each other. David bit down the urge to laugh. Their movements, their facial expressions, even the feminine and playful pitch of their voices, all of it was exaggerated and comical.

“Deal!” the apparent leader of the group said. “I’m Lasca!” She came up to them again, stood as tall as her raptor feet let her, and saluted, a legit military salute at that. Another one who’d watched the scrying pool too much. That made things easier for David, though, and he sighed relief.

“Latia!” one of the gremlas said, and she stood tall on her hooves as she saluted.

“Laria!” the other gremla said.

“Laara!” the other impa said.

David stopped, forcing everyone but Caera to stop behind him.

“You’re all... uh... Those are similar names.” For all his intelligence and ego to go with it, one thing David knew about himself was his utter shit memory for things like names. Not good not good.

“Hatchmates!” Lasca said, and she giggled as she pulled on the nearest gremla’s horn. Latia? Laara? One of them, and she kissed her. Which earned some more giggles, and more kiss trading, and not sisterly kisses. Full-on, romantic kisses. “Come, come!” And she and her three companions dashed down the tunnel without brushing against a single bloodgrip vine.

Before he could so much as gulp, Jes poked him in the back with a claw.

“Ow!”

“I can feel that aura. Stop it.”

“I didn’t—”

“They’re not sisters.”

“I didn’t say they were!”



“Uh huh. Anyone can see that sister fetish from a mile away, perv.” Jes leaned in close until she was directly behind him. “Hatchmates sometimes stick together for a long time.”

“And... get... like that?” He gestured to the four little women as they ran ahead down the narrowing, cruel tunnel, before gesturing for the rest of them to follow.

“Sometimes. Imps and grems in particular, because they fuck like... rabbits? Right? That’s the surface animal?”

He coughed. “It is.”

“And now you’ve got four of them, all sisters, too, ready to—”

“You just said they’re not—”

“All of them excited to help us and the unmarked soul.” She laughed, leaned down, hit the back of his head with her horns, and whispered. “You’re not gonna be happy when they get playful and flirty with you, and then try and eat your heart.”

“They won’t do that... will they?”

She leaned down lower and put her chin on his shoulder so she could whisper directly into his ear as they walked.

“I told you they’re unpredictable, even to themselves. They resist sin auras, and even spire commands. You can’t rely on them, can’t trust them, can’t anything them.”

“Like children?”

“Nothing like human children. They’re not kids. Don’t think of them like that. They’re just volatile, tiny demons with as much a desire for violence and sex as any other demon. Don’t let your guard down.”

He managed a nod, and Jes let him go. Only now that the group of them were in the dark tunnel, stepping around boulders and weaving around vines, did the absurdity of what just happened sink in. He’d just recruited a couple imps and a couple grems to take them through the worst tunnels he’d ever seen, tunnels his girls didn’t know, tunnels that were too small and too nasty for anyone bigger than an imp or grem to fight in. If anything went wrong, they were fucked. If the grems and imps betrayed them, they were fucked.

Daoka clicked quietly a few times as she stepped up beside him again, only to hiss and kick at some bloodgrip with her hoof. Acelina did similar, getting close, only to hiss and growl and stomp some

of the vine with her much bigger hooves. It wasn't long before they had to get in single file, and Acelina's constant hissing announced how much trouble she was having.

"Caera," David said. "Can—"

The tiger looked back at him, and growled. An amber vein lit her eyes for a half second, and that was more than long enough to stop David in his tracks. She looked different.

"What?" she asked.

"I just... wanted to talk about this mission we're going on."

"You said you'd help."

"I know, and I will. But, I don't have a Cainite's clothes, right?" He gestured to himself. "I mean, I guess the loincloth and half breastplate is close enough."

"It might have to be."

He winced. "But, that's not what I was going to say. I just wanted to ask about..."

"Spit it out, David." She didn't bother whispering.

"We have angels chasing us, apparently. They might find a way into the tunnel."

"Maybe."

"What do we do if that happens?"

"Avoid them."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. How to word this.

"What I mean is, if we get put in a position where we have to leave the Cainites alive, so we can get away from the angels, what will you do?"

All that got him was another growl, and a cold shoulder. Either she didn't know, or she knew she was so invested in the warpath they'd suddenly found themselves on, she might just do something stupid and get them all killed. And much as he wanted to point that out to her, he didn't need Mia to tell him that was a recipe for a disaster. Besides, Caera was smart, and probably knew what he was thinking already. Hopefully.

The one-eighty on her personality was still a shock, though. He knew she hated Cainites, and particularly this possible group of them, but he hadn't expected reasonable, introspective Caera to go Rambo on him. And all at the mercy of four little critters they couldn't trust with a potato gun.

Mission one: figure out if they can trust the imps and grems.

“Can I... get past you?” he asked.

“Why?”

“I want to talk to the imps and grems. I need to, uh, make sure we’re on the same page.”

He wasn’t talking to a tregeera demon anymore, at least not the smart, calm one he knew. He was talking to a literal tiger, one of those big Siberian ones that made lions look tiny, and he made sure his voice was sufficiently meek and pathetic. After another quiet growl, she stopped and tilted her body to the side enough he could slip by.

“Thanks,” he said.

She said nothing, only made one of those half growl half rumble sounds in her throat he rarely heard from her. Scary.

David caught up with the imps and grems, and matched their pace. Time to make sure the little critters were trustworthy... ish.

“Hey, La... La.... Sorry, I suck with names.”

“Lasca,” the impa said, and she grinned at him with a big smile. Yeap, just like Acelina’s smile, wide and huge and full of sharp shark teeth. Unlike Acelina, she had big, red demon eyes forever balancing on cute and psycho menace.

“Laria,” another said.

“Laara.”

“Latia.”

David put up his hands. “Sorry, that’s gonna be hard for me, remembering names.”

The girls all giggled, and Lasca slowed down enough to walk only a foot in front of David. Her thin tail brushed his shins, and hit the dozens of tiny cuts there. Ow.

“Unmarked is funny,” Lasca said. “Lasca!”

“Laara!”

“Latia!”

“Laria!”

Oh god, they even said it in a different order.

“Lasca,” he said. “I wanted to ask about what we’re doing, and what’s going on. There’s a lot of Cainites in these tunnels?”

“Yes.”

“From what you said earlier, that isn’t normal?”

“No, not normal. Souls hide. Cainites hide. We’d eat them if we caught them. So they hide.”

He raised a brow. “But not anymore?”

“No! Too many. Killed our imps and grems, other hatchmates, and bigger demons!”

Caera snorted. “Cainites aren’t that strong. There are some powerful demons in these tunnels, Renato included.”

The impa shook her head, big eyes desperate.

“Not true! Strong! Weapons glow!”

“Glow?” David asked.

“Glow red! Black swords. Black axes. Meera metal, but glow! Veins. Red veins.” Lasca shivered and rubbed her arms. “They burned!”

David looked back at Caera, and the tiger lady nodded as she shared his grimace. There’d been one other weapon they’d seen that had red veins and burned things: the rider’s axes. The rider’s axes weren’t meera metal, though, but made of something else, something silvery, shiny, and reflective.

Shit just kept getting weirder and weirder.

“When did this start happening?” he asked.

“She’s an impa, David,” Caera said. “She’s not going to—”

“Month!” Lasca said, and she glared back at Caera. “Month! Or... close?” With a very determined nod and more determined, glaring eyes, she frowned back at the much bigger demon before looking up to David. “Scrying pool said month before. I remember!”

“A month.” Oh fuck. “So, like... maybe around thirty-six days ago?”

“Maybe,” Lasca said. “Strange number. Why number?”

Because he died thirty-six days ago.