

~~Mia~~

“This is a scrying pool?” she asked.

Adron chuckled, and leaned over the big bowl as casually as any human checked their smart phone.

“It is.”

She expected something a little more epic, honestly, but a big wide bowl sitting on top of some rocks in Hell would have to do.

“Where it’d come from?” She already knew the answer.

“Hell.”

“Uh huh.” Groaning, she peeked down over the cliff edge at the rest of the group.

They were taking an early break, a short one. Much as Diogo tried to pass it off as nothing important, she could see the demon didn’t like doing this trek, and he’d taken Adron’s suggestion to let Mia check out a scrying pool as an opportunity for a breather. Considering how massive he was, it was no wonder he struggled with hiking twelve hours a day. Even the gorgala and two vrats hated it, and they were much smaller. But, much as a little part of Mia wanted to tease them about it, Hannah told her not to unless she wanted pain.

They’d stopped by a big cliff wall with a huge alcove cut into its side. Not deep enough to really be a cave, but deep enough they parked their butts inside it and took a breather. Beside it was a steep, semi-natural semi-Hell-grew-this stairway in the mountainside that went up to a small ledge that reached out over the alcove. On it was the bowl, sitting innocently on some rocks at about hip height. The bowl was three feet wide, only about six inches deep, and the liquid inside was very reflective and silvery. Mercury?

“Mirror mirror on the wall,” Adron said, tapping the side of one of his big horns as he considered, “show me... the inside of a random Starbucks.”

“What?” Mia stared at him. But before she could laugh at him or express disbelief, the shimmering image in the liquid changed.

That, was a Starbucks, with people inside drinking coffee and checking out news on their smart phones. The camera, or whatever it was Hell used to spy, flowed around naturally, never quick cutting but seamlessly sliding into new perspectives to show Adron, Mia, and Hannah new angles. It was as if

Hell herself, or whoever piloted the invisible camera, wanted to make sure the scrying pool's viewers got exactly what they wanted.

"Holy shit," Mia said.

"God I miss coffee," Hannah said. With a nod, she leaned over the bowl. "Show me that blond woman's coffee."

No need to finagle or convince, or be hyper specific. The bowl happily did exactly as requested, zooming in on the blond woman, and then her coffee. And then, her sipping the coffee, as if the bowl knew exactly what Hannah wanted without her having to say it.

Hannah groaned and walked away. "Fuck me that was dumb."

"Kinda, yeah," Mia said, laughing. "So, it can show me whatever I want?"

"Whatever you want," Adron said. "As long as it exists and it's on the surface right now."

"As long as it exists..." Oh. That did make things a little more problematic. What could she ask it to show her? The home she never really had, could never find, but always wanted? The close friends she'd never managed to make, despite the dozens of kinda-sorta friends she had?

Maybe some of the hot dudes at her university? Nah. She'd gotten her full of being a peeping tom, and with the threat Diogo gave her not long ago, it was probably best she not think about sex. Whatever the weird aura thing she gave off was, it apparently got a lot stronger when she was horny, and a lot stronger again if she gave into that horniness.

"Show me... show me... Wow, this is hard."

"What?" Hannah asked, stepping up beside her again. "It's not hard. What, you don't miss anything from the surface?"

"I mean I do. I miss cereal and chocolate, and TV, and music, but... You said this is a torture device, Adron?"

"Mhmm. Every so often you'll find a soul or two, hanging out, staring into the bowl, crying over the things they don't have anymore. Sometimes they watch till they starve, and for a human not getting injured, that takes months."

"Months..." Months of watching the things they missed? She couldn't even think of a thing to watch. It wasn't like she didn't miss the surface, she very much did, and Hell and all its horrors and implied future agonies scared the shit out of her. But, fuck, why couldn't she think of anything she really wanted to see? Something she genuinely missed?

Whatever. Make something up.

“Show me my old university. Oh, do I—”

No, she didn't need to specify. The bowl shimmered, and then she was there. The view flowed over the concrete paths along the grass that would have guided her to the different buildings. It didn't go into any of the buildings, but it did circle around them, at one point going up into the air and doing a drone flyby.

“Wow,” Hannah said. “Sometimes it surprises me just how good a camerawoman Hell is.”

“We're sure it's Hell doing this?” Mia asked. “'Cause, I mean, that's so very... smooth, and nice, and... not things I think of when I think of Hell.”

Adron shrugged, and gently rain a claw through the image. The waves turned to silver, and the image shimmered and vanished.

“Hell is cruel,” he said, “but not some clumsy oaf. She'll finesse you, if she wants to.”

No point in asking why they kept referring to Hell as her. ‘Ask Caera’, he'd say, followed by ‘but she won't know, either’.

“I kind of expected the pool to lie to me.”

“Not really the point of the pool,” Adron said. “And—”

A quiet, distant rumbling grabbed their eyes and ears. Back the way they came, along the same mountain but on its other side and higher up, rocks fell, cracking and roaring with impact. Avalanche? Not a big one, but even a small avalanche was pretty damn scary, and noisy. Big rocks, enormous rocks, large enough she could see some of them even kilometers away. Clang, crash, crunch, and underneath it all a thick thundering rumble that vibrated and filled the mountains.

“That happen often?” Mia asked.

The vrat shook his head as he walked back down the unusually nice little curving stairway, back down to the area the demons rested in.

“They happen, but not often. Sometimes an amber vein bursts, the lava pressure getting too much.”

“All these amber veins are filled with lava?” Slowly, Mia stuck out a hand and waved it over one of the amber veins along a rock beside her. The rock wasn't fully disconnected from the ground, but a part of the mountain. The idea that lava was flowing up into it, right beside, was disconcerting.

“Hell’s blood.”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh come on. That is a shitty metaphor. Lava for blood?”

He laughed, shrugging. “It’s not exactly lava. Caera once told me there’s a lot of similarities between it and hellfire, but it’s not like demons are going around doing experiments to find out. Maybe in False Gate. Maybe once upon a time.”

Once upon a time. What a strange sentence to hear in Hell.

Hannah pat Mia on the shoulder. “We’re only a few hours out from the spire, far as I know.”

“When’s the last time you saw it?” Mia asked.

“Long time ago, not long after Adron first gave me some of his blood. I’m... pretty scared.”

“Yeah? Of Zel?”

“Sure, of Zel, and of... the place, really.”

Mia raised a brow. “The place?”

“You’ll see soon.”

Wonderful.

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~~David~~

Déjà vu hit him. This was the second time in four days he plummeted toward the ground with a woman held in his arms. It wasn’t nearly as big a drop this time, but it was a drop straight onto a pile of rocks. Would he survive? Probably not. He’d land, his skull would crack open like a dropped egg, and his brains would splatter.

Fuck. He really wanted to have more sex, especially with Jes and Dao.

That, was a really shitty final thought before the end.

His back hit the mountain slope. It was steep, but not so steep it didn’t create some friction against his body. His cloak yanked up against his neck as it caught on some rock outcroppings, and both he and

Dao, still tight in his arms, swung to the side slightly before it came loose and their slide down to the mountainside resumed.

How come they weren't tumbling? Falling like this and hitting the mountainside, he'd expect everything to be a spinning mess. Oh, Daoka had her hands out, and her nails were dragging along the rocks, and they were doing a much better job snagging on rocks and grooves in the mountainside than his shitty grip could. Somehow, they weren't spinning out of control and breaking their backs against stones.

It didn't last. Daoka shrieked a click as a large rock sticking out of the mountain wall came up underneath them, smashed into her side, and the stumbling started. He didn't let go of her. He tried to keep her away from the wall, to put himself between her and the rock, but everything spun and up was down and up again and rocks came at him from random directions he couldn't understand anymore.

And then it all stopped. They still had maybe a hundred feet to fall, but something stopped them. He forced his eyes up from the death waiting for him, and up at the wings flapping hard. One of the wings looked dented and broken, and Jeskura screamed with each flap.

They hadn't stopped, but they'd slowed down considerably. Parachute speed. Shit.

"Jes!" he yelled. "Be careful to—"

Too late. They landed on the pile of rocks between the two mountains. The ravine, now a big mess of brown boulders, red dirt and black pebbles, had grown quiet with their descent, but it echoed with the sounds of screams as the three of them collided hard with the ground.

A common misconception was, if you did a straight parachute drop like the military did, you landed softly. You very much did not land softly. You hit hard, and if you didn't know how to land right, you'd break something. Thankfully he'd managed to relax a bit, enough that the landing hadn't hurt all that much. That was weird.

No, wait, that wasn't the reason.

Shit. Shit shit shit. He forced himself to his feet. No bones broken. Holy fuck his fingers hurt, and a few of them bled from their tip, and some random parts ached from hitting the mountain slope, but otherwise, he was fine. Dao wasn't.

"Daoka!" he yelled, and squatted down over her. "God damn it, Dao."

She smiled up at him as she clicked a few times. She'd moved him at the last minute. He'd landed on her.

“Dao...” Jes, five feet away, stood up, and collapsed a second later with a scream that hit his bones. The arm of her left wing was broken, and so was her left ankle.

“Oh fuck.” He gulped and looked between the two demons. Oh fuck oh fuck what to do what to do.

Jes dragged herself closer to Dao, now on her hands and knees, and glared down at her friend.

“Daoka you idiot. You...”

Dao clicked a few more times, but they wavered, and a few pained moans slipped into them. The satyr was worse off than the gargoyle. Her right arm was broken, and so was her left leg, above the knee. A femur break. Oh fuck.

“Oh fucking god, I... I’m...” He sank his fingers into his hair and stared down at the two demons. “Fucking god, I—Caera! Oh fuck, Caera! Caera!” He walked away from Jes and Dao, and scanned the mess. The ravine went on for a kilometer in either direction, and the pile of rocks the avalanche had created went on for maybe a quarter of that. A small avalanche. Not so small when it happens right underneath you.

“I... I gotta find Caera,” he said. “You two, uh...”

“Go,” Jes said, groaning as she grabbed her broken, bent wing arm, and yanked.

The shriek she unleashed cut David down to his guts. He would have vomited if he could. The sight of flesh stretching, and the bone inside pressing against the skin before Jes twisted the limb and forced the bones to realign, was too much. He turned away, clutching his stomach.

That wouldn’t have worked on a human, not on Earth at least. Bones didn’t just magically realign like that. Either demons were very durable, or all afterlife bodies were, but he was damn content to not test it, not after dislocating his shoulder when he’d arrived. Even now, he looked down at his bleeding, throbbing fingers, and did his best to think about anything else. Find Caera, and don’t think about broken bones being yanked on and forced back into other bones.

“Hurry the fuck up,” Jes said. “Christ. I’ll help Dao.”

Without looking back, he walked away. But when Dao clicked a couple times, he stopped and turned.

“Will Dao be—”

“She’ll be fine,” Jes said. “I’ll get her up and moving.”

“Your ankle—”

“It’ll heal, now find the damn tregeera.”

“But...” He stared down at Dao, at her broken limbs, and came closer. “I—”

“Fucking. Go.” Jes sat up, reached out for her foot, twisted and yanked, and fell back as she screamed again. He heard the click and crack of bone that time.

Dao smiled at him and waved him off, clicking softly. Not softly, weakly. She was hurt, really bad. So much for protecting her from the fall.

He clenched his fists, and walked in the direction Caera had fallen. Up and over a pile of rocks, around some giant boulders, and through some jagged stones. When Daoka screamed behind him, clicks mixing into her high pitched wails, he covered his ears.

It didn’t take long to find Caera. The tiger lady lay on her side, bits of her dark skin ripped open on her legs and arms. Even her tail had a long gash along its side. But none of her limbs looked broken, and she was breathing. Eyes closed, but breathing. Unconscious? If she had a concussion, he should probably wake her up. Was that even a thing in the afterlife?

Stop thinking. Stop analyzing. What would Mia do? She’d fucking do something instead of overthinking until everything fell apart around him.

He reached down, and lifted. Holy shit Caera was heavy. David was a strong guy; short limbs and some muscle made it easy for little guys to lift a lot of weight. But damn, Caera had some heft to her, and he groaned as he pulled up on her arms and pushed her against a big boulder so she was sitting. His fingers hated that. His aching limbs hated that. He almost screamed as he got her up, and of course when he stood back up, blood dripped from his fingers.

He squatted down beside her and shook her shoulder.

“Caera?” he asked. Still breathing. “Caera.” A cut ran across her forehead, across the scar already there. “Caera. Ca—”

Her eyes shot open, and she snapped out her arm for him, full intent on cutting him to ribbons. But thankfully he’d half expected that, and he jumped away, leaving her swiping at nothing. And she’d missed anyway, to far to the side. Definitely a head injury.

“David?”

“Yeah, it’s me. You okay?”

“We... We fell. We—where’s the... the thing, chasing us?”

“No idea. Jes and Dao are alive, but injured. Broken bones.”

Nodding, Caera clutched her head with one hand as she tried to stand up. And failed. She fell back with a grunt and stared down at her splayed legs, and her tail twitching lightly beside her.

“How... How fucked are we?” he asked. “Jes and Dao won’t be walking for months, and you’re—”

“We’ll recover fast enough,” she said. “I’ll be... good enough to walk in a few minutes. The girls will take a day or two, maybe three.”

“A day or two? To recover from broken bones?”

“We’re demons. You recovered from your ruined feet in a day, didn’t you? All fresh meat do.”

“Yeah but that was just bruises and skin.”

She managed a shrug. Nothing dislocated then.

“If they’re not dead and they still have their limbs, they’ll be fine. It’ll just take a couple days, maybe a few, to recover. If they have resonance. And...”

“And you were already getting hungry because I’ve been dragging your asses across Hell twelve hours a day.” Fucking fuckity fuck. “Alright then. What do I—”

The booming thud of a colossal creature taking a step filled the ravine, and it was only ten feet away. Now that they stood on a pile of rocks instead of a solid path, the stones and pebbles crushed into powder underneath the colossal footprint, and the pile rolled with the new indent. Like it was sinking in quicksand, and it kinda was, the invisible thing took another step, and again the whole ravine shook with the impact.

David fell on his ass as the pile of rocks rumbled and shook. Scampering only led to more tripping as the pebbles rolled underneath him, and he fell on his side. He squinted, expecting gravity to get its revenge and crack his skull open, but his shoulder hit rock instead, and he yelped and rolled onto his back.

He still couldn’t see the thing, whatever it was. But he felt it, the same way anyone felt it when they were being watched. Which of course wasn’t actually a thing, but it still felt exactly like how that was supposed to feel in the movies. Like there was something there, something he couldn’t see, staring straight down at him from a great height, looking into his soul.



The rocks erupted underneath him. No, not erupted. Were crushed. He gasped, looking to breath through the immense weight of being stepped on, but he... felt fine. He looked to Caera, but the tiger lady, half pushed off from the rock she'd leaned against, stared at him, just as confused as him.

He now lay in a big footprint, big enough for his whole body. And he was unharmed, except for the nasty fall from before.

“W-What the—”

The ground did erupt this time, to his right. He sucked in a hard breath, shivers shooting up through his spine into his limbs like someone had stabbed him with ice. But he was fine. Three enormous gash marks, each a foot wide and maybe six feet long, cut along the pile of rocks he lay on, straight through him horizontally.

It happened again, vertically. Four gashes this time, and they ripped the rocks out underneath him and out from under his feet. The invisible thing had tried to cut him into ribbons from head to crotch. But, it couldn't.

It couldn't touch him.

“David!” Caera yelled.

He looked her way, half expecting a bunch of mysterious gashes to rip the boulder she leaned against apart. It had to attack her next. But, nothing. It didn't attack her.

A gigantic rock nearby came up off the ground, lifted by something they couldn't see or hear. But the rock crumbled, broke apart, as if crushed through a grate or filter. Where once a boulder had been hovering a couple feet off the ground, a pile of pebbles, dirt, and dust fell harmlessly on the pile. Had it tried to throw a rock at them?

It roared, or wailed, or shrieked. Whatever it was, whatever strange invisible presence was hunting them, it made noise, but not sound, no vibrating air sending signals into his ears. But there was vibration, something that pulsed out through David's body regardless, and instead of hearing the thing with his ears, he heard it with his bones.

And then it was gone. The air shimmered slightly, like Arnold's Predator, and it was gone. The sensation of something watching him, gone. He sat up and stared at nothing, eyes slowly panning around, first to Caera again, and then to the gashes cut into the crushed rocks underneath him. No more thundering footsteps. No more swipes from a hand that'd been big enough it could have held his entire body in its palm, judging from the slash marks. And that was all assuming it'd been a hand slashing at him, and a foot stomping around.

“What... is going on?” Caera asked. She got down on all fours and walked his way, stumbling slightly. Her limbs worked, but she was a lot more beat up than he was, and probably had the afterlife equivalent of a head injury.

“I don’t know. How would I know? Fucking christ fuck!” He jumped up and gestured out to the empty ravine around them. “Something invisible just tried to kill us!? What the hell!?”

“You.”

“What?”

Caera shook her head as she got closer, until she was beside him, and he followed after her back toward Dao and Jes.

“It tried to kill you.”

“Me...”

“It tried to step on you, and slash you,” she said. “And then... tried to drop a boulder on you, I guess.”

He was right about what had happened, then. Part of him had been hoping he’d been imagining it, or just hallucinating. Damn.

“I mean, you don’t think it would have gone for you after me?”

She managed a weak chuckle. “I was a much bigger threat than you. When you have your pick of targets, you kill the biggest threat first. Right?”

Groaning and nodding, he buried his face in his hands as he walked beside her. He knew that, too, but it made no sense.

“So, you... really have no idea what it was?”

“Not in the fucking slightest, David. There are no invisible... anythings. Not demons, not angels, nothing.”

“Fucking—” Dao and Jes came into view, the two of them sitting against the ravine wall, hundreds of broken small rocks underneath them. David ran over to them, knelt down beside Dao, and looked her up and down. “You okay? You okay?”

Dao smiled up at him, reached with her shaky left arm, and ran her three claws and thumb through his shaggy red hair. The broken right arm and left leg looked straight, but they were swollen and twitching. They’d been set, but the breaks were bad, worse than Jes’s.

After a few more stupid, pointless, panicked breaths, he squeezed Dao's hand.

"Caera's alright," he said. "Mostly alright. She hurt her head."

"I'm fine," the tiger said, and she sat beside them. "You two, on the other hand, aren't going to be doing much for a couple days. We need to get out of this ravine, find some place to hide and recover, and I'll get us something to eat."

He squinted at the tiger. "You can barely walk straight."

With a heavy growl, Caera poked him with her claw. Or she tried, anyway. He stepped out of the way, and everyone saw the tiger try and compensate to poke him again, and miss again.

"I'm... fine."

"You're seeing stars, right? Maybe seeing double? Probably have a throbbing headache?"

Groaning, she gestured to the other two demons.

"They're worse off, and one of us needs to get food."

What would Mia do? Standing around analyzing shit was going to get them killed, especially if an invisible giant monster was hunting them, or, him. Mia would stop worrying about what they couldn't do anything about, and immediately deal with what they could.

"Let's... Do what you said, first. Let's get out of here and find a place to rest, and then we can figure out how to get everyone food."

Jes grabbed the mountain wall and forced herself onto her good foot.

"I've been through this area a few times in my life, fresh meat. So's Caera and Dao. There are no forbidden trees nearby, far as I know. So the only way we're getting something to eat, is if we eat someone." She gestured at her swollen ankle and wing arm. "And how are we—"

Caera walked over to the woman, and nudged her body against the gargoyle.

"Hop on."

"... you can't be serious."

"You're not walking. David isn't strong enough to carry you."

Jes glared down at the tiger, but a few quiet clicks from Dao softened her anger.

"Fine. Fuck me, fine. Just, let me get Dao on there first."

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Of all the things he'd expected to get in the way of their journey, a giant invisible monster causing an avalanche hadn't even been in the top 100. And, much as he wanted to ignore the idea, Caera had been right. When it'd had a chance to attack either him or the incapacitated tiger lady who was twenty times more of a threat than him, it went for him. It'd tried to kill him.

Dao and Jes, both sitting on Caera's back, Jes behind so her bad wing could hang and relax, nodded as they listened to him and Caera recount the event. But neither of them had anything to say. Just as confused as him, and in a lot more pain.

How they managed to sit on her back and not get a spike up the ass, he wasn't sure. Maybe the spikes could be moved around a bit, bent a little where they poked out? Mental note: ask Caera if he could play around with her spine spikes later. In the future, it'd be nice if he could jump onto her back to escape giant invisible monsters.

The ravine didn't go much further, but with Caera struggling to walk straight, and Jes and Dao both groaning quietly between clenched teeth, it felt like eternity. They were hurt, because something tried to kill him. And they all knew it was because he was unmarked, no need to mention that. Something weird was happening, something they didn't understand, and it'd gotten three of them wounded.

He looked down at his fingertips. Slowly healing, by demon standards. Healing ridiculous fast by surface standards. They'd be back to normal by tomorrow, and he'd be hungrier for it. He'd have to eat, too, and if Jes was correct, there was no fruit nearby. Which meant eating something else. Someone else.

Out of the ravine, there were low mountains ahead, small things they would have gone over when on the original path. But the ravine had taken them lower and lower, and now they walked a path as wide as a big canyon, with walls too steep to walk up. Climbable, but not walkable, which meant Dao and Jes weren't going up them until they were healed.

They found a cave, and with a big rock in hand, the closest thing he had to a club, David went in first. Death's Grip had thousands of little caves, with amber veins inside showing they were empty. It also had thousands of little caves with a few imps or grems hiding inside waiting to ambush people, or enough bloodgrip to kill anyone unlucky enough to trip in it; they'd ran into a few of both already. But this cave seemed fine.

Jes climbed off Caera's back, hopped on one foot, and sat down in the back of the small cave. It went deep enough you couldn't see the exit from the back room. Good for a temporary stop, maybe even for resting for a couple days.

Dao clicked, and held out her arm for David, smiling. He managed to return the smile, but even without a mirror he knew it was half-assed.

"Thanks," he told her, "for... taking the fall there, at the last second."

Dao shrugged with her one good arm, clicked a few more times, and continued to hold out her arm for him.

"Dao, you know you're hurt because... well, indirectly, because of me, right? You're not angry at me?"

She clicked a few times, tilting her head to the side.

"I know," he said, shrugging as he slipped under her good arm and helped support her weight. "I know it's not actually my fault something's trying to kill me and got everyone hurt. I'm not about to drown in misplaced guilt. But, still..."

Dao leaned in, rubbed her closest horn against the side of his head, and put a kiss on his cheek as he gently set her down on the ground next to the frowning gargoyle. How any demon could be as understanding as this satyr, he had no idea.

"Dao might be okay with that," Jes said. "But I'm not. We're working together to kill Diogo, and Tacitus and those Cainite dicks, remember? Giant invisible what-the-fucks weren't in the plan."

Groaning, he sat down a few feet away and wiped the sweat from his brow.

"You're telling me. I have no idea what's going on. I've had no idea what's been going on for a while. I'm just trying to get Mia, and then she and I will be out of your hair."

Dao clicked and shook her head.

"Dao, come on." Jes poked at the satyr with her tail. "That thing, whatever it was, and assuming there was only one of them, was... was... I don't know! We don't know! No one knows! So I don't know about you, but I plan to not get killed hanging around this kid. I don't care if he's special or has a giant dick or whatever." With a small shrug, she nodded in David's direction. "No offense."

"None taken. You're just being pragmatic."

She raised a brow. “I’m... pretty sure most people would still take offense to being told they’re going to be left to deal with their shit on their own, and probably die to it.”

“I’m not most people.” Nodding, he looked to Caera. Without needing to be asked, the tiger had already taken a guard position twenty feet away, near where the cave tunnel curved and the exit appeared. “Caera, how much longer do you think you’ll need before you can go hunting?”

“None. I can go now.”

“Come on, I thought you were the smart one of the group.”

That got her. Caera groaned as she looked over her shoulder at him, but her tail swished a little, happy with the compliment.

“Give me a couple hours.”

“Alright, a couple hours, and then we go hunting.”

Her tail stopped swishing. “Uh, we?”

After a heavy gulp he hoped they didn’t notice, he mustered up his best, most confident nod.

“You’re injured and you’ll need help.”

“You’ll just slow me down.”

“Maybe, but that’s still better than you passing out or tripping and getting killed, right? Besides.” He held up an arm and flexed. “I’m small but I’m not a weakling.”

It was true, too, and he knew they knew it. Yeah sure he was a small guy, a bit shy of five and a half feet tall, but he’d busted his ass getting in shape. He was light and agile, just horribly inexperienced. He needed experience if he was going to survive Hell, and nothing spurred action like necessity.

Easy thoughts to have, not so easy to follow through on. He was terrified, and he clenched a fist to hide his shivering fingers.

Groaning, Caera opened her mouth, but slowly closed it as she looked back out to the entrance of their cave.

“We’re going to leave Jes and Dao unguarded?”

He nodded again. “Unless you have a better idea. And it’s not like I’m in a position to play bodyguard, not without a weapon.” A large rock wasn’t much of a weapon. And, much as he was in great shape, being small and light meant those meera metal weapons were a giant pain to use. They’d

get him killed, just like how they'd gotten the humans Jes and Dao fought killed. Too slow, left you too open. He needed a smaller, thinner, lighter version of one of those weapons. Maybe he'd find one? Or make one? Another thing on his to-do list.

"Fine," Caera said. "I'll let you know when I'm ready to go."

Nodding, he reached for the wall to push himself up, but Dao clicked a few times and held up her good arm. David came closer, and followed Dao's hand down until he sat next to her, directly between the gargoyle and satyr. And he made damn sure to not touch any broken limbs.

Dao clicked a few times. A strange sort of click, soft and lower pitched. Soothing. Before he knew it, Dao leaned in and kissed his cheek, before snuggling up to his side.

"Ugh," Jes said, rolling her eyes. "Dao, if being around him—"

Dao clicked a couple times more, harder and louder.

"Fine. We'll talk about it later."

Another couple clicks, before Dao kissed his cheek again, rubbed her closer, big curling horn against the side of her head, and relaxed against him. He had to fight a bit to keep from falling over, but Jes slid in a little closer too until she was pressed to his other side, and helped keep him straight. Much as Jes wasn't all too happy hanging with him had nearly gotten her and her lover killed, it was obvious she couldn't help but do whatever she could for Dao.

"I expect some quality fucking later, when we're healed up," Jes said, groaning as she leaned her head back against the stone and closed her eyes. "All this shit we're putting up with. Damn right you owe us, and damn right I expect to be repaid. Great sex is a good first step."

He raised a brow at the tall woman beside him. Okay, well, she might not have been happy with her situation, but shitty circumstances didn't affect her sex drive in the slightest. She'd said demons fight and fuck. Doing one probably didn't affect the other negatively. And from what Caera said, they often turned to one, when they couldn't satisfy the other. Good to know.

He smiled at Jes, and gave her a small nudge of his elbow, earning a sliver of an eye open from her closer eye.

"What?"

"I'm gonna make this right."

"Uh huh. How you gonna do that?"

“No idea yet. But I’ll figure something out, and I’ll pay you back. I mean it.”

“You...” She laughed and nudged him back. “Christ, you really mean it, don’t you?”

“Yeah, of course. I mean, I said it, right?”

A poke yanked his eyes down to his legs, and he smiled down at the long, smooth, semi-thick tail poking his knee.

“Ever heard of lying?”

He winced and shook his head.

“Fuck that. Fuck... lying.” Just saying the word was enough to spark fire through his limbs.

Jes laughed some more, leaned in, and nudged the top of his head with her cheek; she was a lot taller than him.

“You, are too fucking precious.”

Daoka clicked once.

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“I need a weapon,” he whispered.

“Think you can lift one?” Caera managed a weak shrug, before motioning him to follow. They weren’t following paths anymore. You couldn’t hunt on a path. If you wanted to catch someone and kill them, you had to get off the beaten path and go looking, and Death’s Grip had plenty of places to do that.

Sharp pain shot up his leg.

“Fffff—” He bit down the word and yanked his foot up. A drop of blood dripped from under his big toe, and one of the bloodgrip vines shifted as he pulled his weight off it. “God damn it,” he whispered.

Caera smiled down at him, and brushed aside some of the fucking stupid plant that lay in their path.

“Are you strong enough to lift a meera sword or axe?”



“Barely. But I’m not heavy enough to make it work anyway.” With a second to adjust, Caera waiting for him, David brushed off his now slightly bleeding foot, his cloak, his half-chest armor, and resumed the climb. “But I’ve been thinking. Can you break meera metal?” He tapped the battered and bent chunk of black metal covering one side of his chest. It dinged quietly. It was very thin, and still kinda heavy and annoying.

“Sure. It’s durable, but it can break. Why?”

“I was thinking.” He pulled on a big rock, and half jumped to join her on the next ledge. “Find me a meera sword, and break it in half. Should drop the weight a lot, and bring the center of gravity in a lot closer to me.”

“Center of—I’ll take your word for it.”

He grinned at the tiger lady. She was smart, a lot smarter than Jes or Dao, but not smart in the same way he was. And judging from the playful smile — full of giant sharp teeth — she gave him, she liked that. Who knew he’d have an easier time getting along with demons than humans?

“Is it doable for us? Break a sword in half or something?”

“No idea. It’ll be tricky, but I’m sure we’ll find you a sword sooner or later.”

“I had one before. Jes and Dao wouldn’t let me keep it.”

She chuckled, and had to fight to keep it quiet.

“Yeah, well, I wouldn’t trust you blindly either, back then.”

“And now?”

“Now, I think both you and your sister are completely clueless about what’s going on. But you also both seem like very nice, very naive humans, who really have no place in Hell.”

He nodded and sighed, and climbed the next rock after the tiger.

“Thanks, I guess.”

She winked at him, and half prowled, half slithered over the next rock, so low to the ground she dragged her stomach and some of her armor over the stone. Without even bothering to look, she brushed aside more bloodgrip, often twisting her tail so she could use the spikes along its top to nudge the horrible plant out of the way. It didn’t take an expert to see the woman was comfortable hunting, very comfortable. She was at least a century old, so there was that.

“You know where you’re going?” he asked.

She gestured to some of the plants. "I'm not the only one who's moved these."

Would you look at that. True to her word, there were some lines carved into the dirt, and scratches against the rocks. The thorns on bloodgrip were so tough, they could scratch stone, and a bunch of them meant someone had moved the vine out of the way.

"Recent?"

She nodded, held a finger to her lips, and took a deep obvious breath through her nose. She smelled something.

It was easy to treat this hunting trip as just something he needed to do, at least until the reality hit him. He and the tiger demon, were on a trip out to kill someone. Humans, or demons, probably humans. For all his ability to over-think everything, but keep the emotional reality out of the way, it rushed him like an ocean wave now, complete with its icy stab. It couldn't be like last time, where he'd just frozen and let Dao and Jes kill the humans. He needed to be useful.

He hoped they found some grems and imps to kill. Demons seemed a little easier on his soul to hurt. Or at least, grems and imps did, that first day. Now that he'd been hanging around with demons, would he freeze if Caera asked him to stab a satyr like Dao? To kill a gargoyle like Jes?

Hopefully not. Far as he could tell, Dao, Jes, and Caera were a lot nicer than most demons. In Hell, there was zero reason to feel bad about killing someone. It was Hell. Survival of the fittest, in a world where everyone was either a flesh-hungry demon, or a deplorable human being.

He tightened his fists, clenched his teeth, and followed Caera into a small cave.

Hell was cruel. For obvious reasons, sure, but for not-so-obvious reasons, too. The entrance to the small cave, low enough he had to crouch and get on his hands, was dark, with no amber veins. And it had bloodgrip. Caera did her best to push the stuff aside, but she didn't want to make noise, either. That left it up to David to avoid getting punctured.

He got punctured. Another thorn, this one in the palm. He clenched his teeth hard enough to make his dentist cry, but he made no noise. It only bled for a second, not a deep wound, and the skin didn't take long to seal over well enough he'd be fine if he didn't put too much pressure on it. Quick healing for minor wounds. Normal in Hell, according to the girls. But he was getting hungrier, too.

Eventually the tunnel opened wider, and amber veins revealed themselves. They glowed bright, indicating the time of day, and they lit up the dark stone and the chunks of black rock mixed into the brown and red. Enough light to see again, and avoid bloodgrip vines. But the tunnel twisted and turned

harshly. He could never see any further than ten feet, which was usually occupied by Caera's big butt and thick tail.

But he heard something, and it wasn't Caera. The tiger was probably three hundred pounds, but she didn't make a sound, not even breathing; she was breathing, just damn quietly. The few pieces of armor she wore, chunks of that meera metal strapped snug to limbs and her chest with leather, would have made a fair amount of clanks and dings if they hit any part of the tunnel as she prowled. They didn't. Damn she was good, even with her injury.

The tunnel opened more, until David had enough room to get in beside Caera's tail. Nice and low, nice and slow, each step a deep crouch half supported by his hands, while his cloak didn't make a sound as it dragged along the stone. When he heard his own breathing, he forced himself to breath slower, and open his breathing passages as best he could. Only when he could hear his heartbeat in his ears, could he hear the reason Caera had come to a stop.

People were ahead, chatting. Demons? He couldn't tell. Too far to be nothing but murmurs to his ears.

Caera handed him a big rock. He took it, and had to use a lot of strength to one-hand it, but it was clear what Caera wanted. Follow her, and when she created the opportunity, use the rock. Throw it? He wasn't a hobbit. No, Caera expected him to attack someone with it directly.

He squeezed the big rock, and nodded. Don't think about it, just do it.

They continued along. Boulders occasionally blocked their path until they got further, and found the path continued around them. Perfect places for ambushes, and Caera knew it. At one point, she paused, and took something apart with her hands. A pile of bones, arranged like a house of cards. A sound trap? Caera looked back to him, and mouthed — with her deceptively wide and shark-like mouth — 'humans'. He nodded.

Deeper and deeper into the mountain, it got warm. Caera didn't sweat, but David had to wipe a drop from his eyes. Heat sucked. Humans hid in this insanity?

Apparently they did, and more than a just a couple. Five humans sat in a larger section of the deep cave, three men, two women, and they wore bits of armor, leather cloaks, and one of them even had a demon skull dangling from their hip. They had weapons, too. One big black sword, and one axe. Ugh, why not a spear? A spear would be great. The most underrated, most influential and useful melee weapon in all history. Human history, anyway.

The only reason the humans couldn't see Dave and Caera, was their rapt attention on the scratch marks on the wall in the back of the room, above some glowing amber veins. No, wait, not veins. Glowing runes. Plus, Caera refused to let even the smallest sliver of herself stick out from around the rocks on the tunnel, save for a single spot where the nearby amber veins weren't shining very well. Hell loved shadows, and the tunnels were even worse for it, with the amber casting sharp shadows perfect for hungry demons to hide in. Caera's horns didn't stick very high above her head, either. They were for ramming and stabbing, not posturing.

She did exactly that. Without making a sound, no roar to announce her presence, not even a grunt of exertion, she dashed around the rock into view, and threw herself at the group. They'd gotten into a more involved conversation about the scratch marks, and Caera had picked the exact moment they'd all looked to the wall, exposing their backs for a whole half second. She was too good at this.

The humans had just enough time to gasp before the tregeera ran into one, her head tilted down slightly so they were immediately skewered on her horns. And like a bull, she threw her head up, and tossed the human aside like they weighed nothing. The other humans jumped to their feet, some picking up rocks like David's, two others picking up the sword and axe.

Caera went for the two with the rocks first. One tried to block her swipe, but a rock only managed to block the tiger's big, clawed hand once, while the other hand got the woman straight in the chest. The claws went deep, above the little bit of armor the woman had, directly into the clavicle and throat. David didn't watch what happened to her throat after.

The two with the meera weapons were slow. The man with the rock wasn't, and he brought down the big thing like a mallet toward Caera while his companion died. Caera saw it coming, and had already been ducking to the side, half standing half pouncing forward with the power of her hind legs. Gravity didn't mean shit to Caera. Her massive weight hit the wall, hands first, then feet, and she bounced off the dark stone onto the man who'd missed her.

David came closer.

The man underneath Caera screamed, but she was already getting back up onto her hind feet as she slashed one hand to the side, and the man's throat disappeared in a red splatter. The first man she'd run-through with her horns crawled away, but they didn't get far, blood pouring out of their midsection over the stone. Hell was all too happy to suck the blood up into the mountain, and her dark stone turned a shade redder.

The human with the axe came at Caera, the big blade already swinging through the air from above, like he was going to chop wood with it. Caera was too fast. Even with her huge cat-like body,

she managed to throw her weight to the side, and counter-pounce opposite of the axe, straight at the man. But the axe came down fast, and David braced himself for demon brains.

The huge black blade hit one of her horns, half bouncing the axe back up, half pushing Caera down to the ground. But she already had her hands underneath her again and caught her weight. She'd blocked the axe with her horn on purpose. Snarling, she pushed herself back up seamlessly, a pouncing motion she used to drive her weight onto the axe-wielder, and tear into him.

Except, Caera missed. Partly. Her body landed on the axe user, and she got her claws into him, but the motion threw her weight forward and she half rolled, sending the man's blood and flesh around and onto the ceiling. The axe went flying, and the man wielding it half screamed, half gargled on blood, as Caera's claws came out of him at an odd angle, mostly straight out. Instead of dying almost instantly, the man was left a choking mess, chest torn up, but throat mostly intact. And Caera's half roll meant she hit her side against a giant boulder sitting near one of the other connecting tunnels, hard enough the ding of her armor against the rock echoed through the cave.

David came closer, and refused to look at the dying man.

The woman with the sword came at Caera, screaming. It was a mad scream, a crazy person's scream, the sort of scream you made when you were rabid and beyond reason. For a split moment, it seemed like the woman about to slash at Caera wasn't a person at all. It was some... thing, some entity wearing a cloak and armor like David, some monster that was going to kill his friend and eat her heart. And then Jes and Dao would starve, and die, and...

David brought down the rock on the back of the woman's head. Hard. He knew he had to put every bit of weight he had into it, light as he was, and his feet came up off the ground half an inch with the impact of stone against the woman's skull. Bone broke, and the big rock went a lot deeper than he expected it to. Than he wanted it to. There was softness at the end, before the woman's body fell, a texture he felt through the big stone he'd wished to God he hadn't felt.

"David!" Caera's voice.

A shadow came up from behind one of the rocks, and David spun, gore-smeared rock still in his hands. No thought to it, just a reflex. He'd hit Mia a few times with a book, or the back of a hand, just accidental stuff when spinning around because she'd randomly and accidentally surprised him. This was like that, plus adrenaline, plus fight-or-flight, plus blood pumping in his ears telling him to hunt and kill. Aura? No. Maybe. His aura? Something angry and alive in him told him to attack, and he did.

And he smashed in the face of another person, an older man, someone maybe in their seventies. They were emaciated, and they'd jumped at David with only a small rock in their hand. Light. They crumpled like paper, spun, fell, and their empty eyes stared ahead.

355 changed to 354.

"Good reflexes," Caera said. "Fuck me, my head is throbbing. Blocking that axe was dumb. I'm seeing double again, and—David? David, you okay?"

He stared down at the old man with half his face caved in, at the woman missing half of her skull, and at the other bodies and the blood pouring out of them. The one Caera had failed to kill fast twitched and writhed, and his bloodshot eyes glared up at them, but he'd be dead in moments.

David gulped down the huge rock in his throat, looked at the much smaller rock in his hands, and the gore on it. Nausea hit him, and he dropped the weapon.

"Fucking... christ, I'm going to be sick."

Caera tilted her head as she prowled over to him, sat in front of him, and nudged his side with a hand.

"Why?"

"Why?" He stared at the tregeera, and then back down at the old man he'd killed. "I killed..." The words were meaningless, especially to a denizen of Hell. This was a normal thing for her.

Caera sighed and shook her head, short black tendrils bouncing around lightly between her horns. Which of course instantly made her groan and clutch her head with her bloody hand.

"Fuck me," she said. "I need to lie down. Let's get back to the others." And with all the casualness of a farmer taking cows to the slaughter, she turned around, and got to work on the bodies.

"I..." He clenched his fists and looked away. He knew this would happen, that he'd have to kill other humans. And he knew it'd suck, too. But something in his guts told him what he did was fucked up, wrong, and he should do everything in his power to fix the mistake. Every god damn fucking fiber in his whole body told him what he just did was inhuman.

So much for intellectualizing. Sighing and swallowing down the nausea, he forced his eyes back to the symbols on the wall. Focus on something else. Ignore what just happened. He could have a mental breakdown when Dao and Jes and Caera were fed and healing.

"Did you want to read these?" he asked, gesturing to the symbols on the walls. Hundreds of scratch marks, runes, and some glowing amber runes centered on the big back wall of the alcove.

“I glanced at them,” she said, between the crunching sound of a breaking sternum. “Pretty old stuff. No wonder they were trying to read them. Fucking Cainites convinced they can find something about Cain in them.”

“They can read them? They—” Oh. He could read them, too. “Thee... yonder...” Oh shit it got worse. “Georn... seofen? The fuck is—oh I get it. This is old English. Like, really old English.”

“That’s how English-speaking humans read it. You see it as an old version of your language. It’s Estian, though, a much, much older version than old English. By tens of thousands of years, probably.”

“Everyone speaking Estian has got to be the most... I don’t know, weird thing about Hell. And... Heaven, now that I think about it. The angels all spoke to me in English, but were they speaking Estian?”

“Probably.” More crunch crunch, and a few kasplat noises. He did not look.

“You can read this old Estian stuff?”

“Barely. I worked at it for decades.” She lifted her head long enough to glance his way. “The Estian runes are talking about three spire rules who got in a fight at some point. Probably during the spires war. Nothing important.”

He stroked his chin. Ah, yes, quite, the spires war, mmmm mmmm.

More crunching noises. He twisted a little to put his back to the gory mess.

“We got lucky,” Caera said. “Just a small group. They’d probably camped here for a few weeks now, deciphering.” She chuckled softly. “I bet the morons were trying to decipher the ancient runes, too.”

“Ancient runes?” He looked her way. Oh god fucking damn it, why did he look her way? Her big teeth dripped with blood, and he saw her throat just long enough to see the small bulge go down its length. A fed tiger was a happy tiger, and it meant she’d be able to keep him alive all the better, but he was happier not thinking about her big smile and many, sharp, big teeth ripping into human flesh.

You’re in Hell, David. Get over it.

“The amber runes, in the middle of the wall there, those are ancient ones. Not all the amber vein runes are from the ancient language, but all ancient language is written with amber veins. Tapping into the amber veins to write runes is something no one’s done in thousands and thousands of years.”

He nodded, smiling as he listened. She was nerding-out over what she liked. If he wanted, she’d go on and on about the subtle differences between the words at different points in history, probably. He

knew the feeling, not for this specific topic, but he knew all too well what it was like to rant at someone about something he liked.

“So ancient is... another language?”

“Far as I can tell, yes.”

“Does it have a name?”

“No, everyone calls it the ancient language.”

He nodded, and ran his eyes down the normal, non-glowing runes. They were big things with hard edges that ended in sharp points, not exactly a language full of nuance and detail, and how his brain managed to turn them into English letters and words, and very old English letters and words, he didn't know. Someone had carved them into the stone using a chisel or something, and they hadn't done a good job. It wasn't some sort of epic retelling by some powerful wise demon, sharing knowledge for a new generation of demons. It was done probably by a small group of demons hiding out in the cave, like some small tribe; Death's Grip was all too similar to some ancient human civilizations, areas filled with small tribes of 'barbarians' that weren't always too kind to each other.

The amber runes between the scratched-in runes, on the other hand, were a different matter entirely. It flowed, beautiful symbols that lined up with each other in a dance, and many of the symbols looked like the one burned onto Caera's shoulder, flowing lines ending in sharp points. Did it read left to right, right to lead, up to down? No idea, but it was obvious it'd been there on the wall long, long before the other symbols. Now that he had a second to look around, he could see the curvature of the cave walls, the three tunnels connecting with the room, all of it was either directly or indirectly pointing at the glowing symbols.

This wasn't some random cave in a tunnel network. This was a room you came to to read the runes. Were the runes placed here because of that, or were the tunnels made because of the runes? Hell was alive apparently, so—

It clicked, like a light switch in his brain. Recognition. He blinked. A lot. Slowly, he stepped over the closest body, and came up to the glowing amber runes.

“David?”

He stared, lungs frozen. His hand reached out and touched the lines of the glowing veins. Amber veins were always warm, sometimes even too hot to touch, and these were no different. Like Caera said, runes made with amber veins, a lost art.



“These are... ancient runes?” he asked.

“Yes. I said that already. What’s wrong with you?”

“You’ve... seen these runes before? In this specific cave, I mean?”

“Pretty sure, yes. Years ago, but I remember finding these. They’re not nearly as well hidden as others. Why?”

He stared at the runes, the alien language, and ran a finger along one of their edges.

“Lucifer... and... Belial... lay scars... upon the stone... deep, and tall, choking life from... all within.” Quiet thumps filled his hearing. His heartbeat again. “Death’s Grip.”

He expected Caera to say something, maybe scream with excitement, or laugh at him and say he was joking. But, when he looked back at her, she just sat there, staring at him, mouth half open with a couple drops of blood falling from her lips.

“... what?” she asked, red and black eyes wider than he’d ever seen.

“That’s what... the other runes say, these glowing ones.” He looked back at them, tilting his head to the side. Readable. Why were they readable? He looked around the room at the other runes that’d been carved by a chisel or something, and how rough they were, with their hard edges. Chicken scratches his brain turned into English. It was like the afterlife was some sort of reverse Tower of Babel, forcing him to understand something he shouldn’t have been able to.

But the other runes, the ancient language written in amber, it was different. The strange symbols flowed into his brain, and became... became. English didn’t come into it, the symbols just were, a language he didn’t know but knew. Like, waking up one day and being completely fluent in a second language, able to think in its terms, its shapes, its inflections.

“You can read that?” she asked after a heavy silence, and walked over to him on her hands and feet. “The glowing runes?”

“I, uh... I mean, I uh... can. Easily.”

“Easily!?” She stood up, placed a hand against the wall of the cave, and gestured to it with the other as she looked down at him. “It took me decades to learn how to read old Estian. I... don’t even know where to begin with the ancient language.”

“It’s not ancient... I mean, it probably is, but it’s not an ancient form of Estian. It’s something else.”

“How do you know?”

“Because my brain isn’t interpreting it as English. It’s, just... another language.”

She lowered herself back down onto her hands, never taking her eyes off him.

“Another language you speak?”

“Yeah... and not French.”

“French? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Canadian joke, don’t worry about it.” He shook his head, and ran a finger along some of the symbols. “They’re... They’re in my head. The runes, I mean. They’re in there, and they... mean... something, on their own. They’re in there, and I can see them, and think them, and they mean... stuff.”

“Mean... stuff.” Groaning, Caera reached out and grabbed his wrist. Wet warmth coated his skin, and he stared down at the red liquid that now dripped from his palm and fingers. A heart. “Eat.”

“I—”

“Assuming you’re not lying to me, and far as I can tell you’re the last person in Hell who’d lie about anything, you can read the ancient language. That means there’s no way I’m letting you die, David, even if I have to force-feed you. Eat. Now.”

He winced as he met her eyes. Hard, stern, the sort of eyes he gave Mia when he took away her energy drinks and told her to drink water. She wasn’t going to take no for an answer.

He looked down at the hunk of flesh in his hand, and sighed.

“How does it taste?”

“From the betrayers who’ve eaten them, they say it tastes like a forbidden fruit.”

He squinted at her with one eye. “Are you lying to me?”

She rolled her eyes. “They also said it tastes a little stronger. There, satisfied?”

A little stronger. The fruit he’d eaten had tasted like almost-raw meat, and he’d liked it. And if eating another human’s heart sent the same satisfying, almost tinglingly pleasant sense of fulfillment through him, he wasn’t sure he could take that. This was cannibalism.

Except, not really? This was the afterlife. Different rules. Or maybe he was just telling himself that to make what he was about to do okay? Just like killing those two people?

This is Hell. Get over yourself.

He bit into the heart. He had to bite it, because Caera had given him an entire heart, and it'd take a few big mouthfuls to get the whole thing down. Worse was that it fought him, tried to not tear when he pulled at it, but he bit hard, desperate to get this over with as quickly as possible. Flesh tore, and a chunk of the meat was now between his cheeks.

And it did taste good. It tasted more than good. It tasted great, just as good as the fruit, like a marinated steak with salt and pepper and other sauces and... He frowned down at the heart and the blood it leaked between his fingers, and finished it off quickly. Don't think about it. Don't think about what you did with the rock minutes ago. Get the flesh down.

He did. And hated every minute he enjoyed it. What the fuck.

"That was... too easy," he said.

The tiger chuckled as she stood up on her hind legs, four hearts in her hands, and walked for the exit.

"All betrayers say that. Come on, let's go."

"I'm not a betrayer."

"No, you're definitely not. You're not human, either. No one can read those old runes, David."

"I..."

"Plus, you've got an aura, and it changed during the fight. For a second there, it wasn't the constant horny aura you put out like sex is the only thought in your head. For a moment, I felt... something a whole lot different, right when you hit the woman with the rock."

He did not look back at the corpses, with ripped open chests. Six dead, two of them his kills. One, because he'd caught them unawares. Another, because they were old, and starving. They'd died old, came to Hell with a weak body, and he'd bashed their face in with a rock.

How the fuck was he supposed to 'get over himself' over shit like this? This was—

His vision flashed white, and blurred in a maelstrom of images. Noises, voices, scenes he recognized. A street. A sidewalk. Someone pushing someone else into the traffic. His hands. Her hands?

"Fuck!" He stumbled back. His legs. David's legs, not the woman's. His ass on the stone ground, not a street. But there was a street, and a woman's hands in front of him. And someone who'd just been hit by a car, and had their head splattered on the asphalt.

“David? David, you okay?” Caera was with him in a second, squatting down beside him and using the flat side of her big tail to hold him up. Her hands were a bit busy, holding hearts.

The images vanished, Caera’s face cutting through the blurring fog until all that remained was the cave, its amber veins, and her. But the memories remained.

“I... I saw...” Blackness yanked him down, and buried him in its grip.

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~~Mia~~

The rest of the hike to the spire was uneventful, kinda. Nothing attacked them, and none of them expected anyone to, either. In the valley, they were ‘safe’, as Adron put it, complete with air quotes. No reason for them to look behind them, or maintain a perfect formation, but that also meant they were more free to glare back at Mia and give her the stink eye.

They didn’t trust her. They hadn’t ever trusted her, but now they didn’t trust her in that ‘this little girl is dangerous’ kinda way, which was a very strange feeling. She’d never had anyone look at her like she was dangerous. Quite the opposite, in fact. Being barely five feet tall had meant a life of people thinking she was completely harmless; one of the reasons she’d gotten into resistance training. Alas, a little muscle on her thighs and curve on her butt hadn’t really helped make people fear her on Earth’s surface, and certainly wasn’t helping her in Hell. But now she was, apparently, not exactly human, and had an aura they all feared quite a bit.

At least they stopped checking to see if she tried to run. The valley was wide and mostly flat, making any attempt to run and hide pointless. Well, maybe she could hide, but considering the sights before her, that wasn’t happening.

She came closer to Hannah and Adron, and closer, until she almost touched their sides with her shoulders. Eyes wide until the hot air stung, she gulped hard, and slowly stepped around Adron to put him between her and one of the big spikes sticking up out of the ground. A big, black spike, more of that black stone she’d heard the meera metal was made of. And skewered on it, was a person, a human. The spike was thin enough that whoever killed the man had made sure the spike had gone up between the legs... and out the mouth.

She covered her mouth and forced her eyes in another direction. Fucking christ, was Vlad the Impaler still alive down here?

It didn't get any better as they got closer to the spire. More spikes, many with a corpse on them, and many of the bodies weren't human. Dead tigers, dead vrats like Adron, a dead gargoyle, a dead satyr, and a few dead big brute boys, too. How the hell did someone get one of those brutes onto a spike that stuck up twelve feet in the air? They were huge! But someone had, or someones, and the dead demons had spikes going straight up through their whole body. Most of the corpses were skeletons, but plenty were new.

“What... What happened?” she asked.

“Zel doesn't tolerate dissidence,” Adron said, gesturing to a nearby spike with his tail. “Don't step out of line and you won't wind up on one of these spikes. Try and dodge the call of the horde, though, and she'll do worse than sink you on a spike.”

Mia should have seen this coming. Of course a ruler of Hell would be more than capable of enforcing their rule, and plenty happy to be brutal about it. She didn't bother asking if these humans and demons had been alive when put on the spikes. She knew.

There was more than spikes, too. Hell had a motif, and it — or she — stuck to it like a goth teenager utterly convinced they had to wear their new sense of fashion with religious devotion. The mountains in the distance were dotted with burning bushes, with more than a few of them sticking up from some rocky areas in the valley. It was the black skulls that gave her pause though, hundreds, maybe a few thousand of them, sticking up out of the ground on black poles five feet tall. The skulls were demon skulls, complete with big fangs and big defined jaws, but they didn't exactly fit any of the demons Mia had seen so far. Either way, they were spread out perfectly and evenly, in a circular shape around the spire. And according to Adron, they hadn't been carved or crafted. They'd grown.

A few amber veins ran along the ground, but rarely, as if they preferred the jagged mountains to flat ground. Except for one particular spot where a few dozen of them converged, and disappeared into a crack in the ground.

“What's that?” Mia asked, pointing to the spot.

Adron smiled down at her and walked toward the crack. Stopping shy of it, he gestured.

“Don't fall.”

Oh, don't fall, no problem. Not like she was in Hell and any misstep could easily spell her instant death.

She approached, stopped, squinted up at the smiling demon, grabbed his tail, and came closer. Of course he just laughed, but he also didn't yank his tail free as she approached the big crack in the dark stone.

It was only a couple feet wide, but it also went a few hundred feet along the ground, begging for someone to forget it existed, fall in, and die. And they would die. The heat pouring up from the crack was immense, and she could only stick her head out for a second before she had to yank it back. Hell's hot breezes bothered her eyes sometimes, but the waves of heat coming up from deep below were far worse. That, was lava, bright and flowing deep in the earth. Not Earth. Hell.

"Lava. This is the stuff inside the amber veins?"

"Yeap."

"You said it was Hell's blood?"

"We call it lava," Adron said, "but some demons call it liquid hellfire. And a few call it the blood of Hell." Shrugging, he gently pulled back on his tail, drawing Mia away from the crack. He'd been close enough there'd been no danger of her falling, but she held onto the tail regardless.

"Come," Diogo said, and he continued on. How nice of him to give her a whole five seconds to check something out.

Everyone fell back into the group, and they walked between the skull brazier poles toward the spire. Spire was a weird word for it, fitting and not. It was a tower, and it had a pointed top, but it was more like... like... there wasn't a word for it. A growth? Whatever the thing was, it had slabs of black stone at the base, but it also had entire sections of... flesh, covering chunks of the black. Almost as if one of the much smaller black spikes surrounding Mia had grown a million times too big, and was covered in fleshy alien growth. Flesh, and bone. White sections reached up high across it, looking way too much like the side of a bone being exposed from underneath the muscles that coated it. And every so often, a giant balcony circled the entire tower, something made of more black stone, and black metal too, but with white claws sticking off the edges, claws that must have been bigger than her entire body.

"Is that... flesh?" she asked. Now that the tower was only a kilometer away, she could see the red and white stuff weren't more rock, but actual bone and muscle. It wasn't a trick of the eyes. With each step they came closer, it only got worse. The flesh chunks on the outside didn't hold still, but pulsed every so often, like a heartbeat. Like... Hell's heartbeat?

Screeching grabbed her eyes, and she froze as a few hundred pairs of wings took to the air. The lowest of the circling metal balconies erupted in movement, and more than Mia stared up as wings

blocked out the sky of fire. Demons were everywhere. Imps and grems jumped from the spire and glided overhead, spiraling over Mia and the group, many cackling, many chirping and clicking, all of them making noise. A few glided over to the crack in the stone ground, grabbed the hot air under their wings, and went higher. Many landed and perched on a spiked corpse, took a bite, and hopped away, scampering on the ground. Hundreds of them waited, and watched Diogo. They recognized him.

The base of the huge spire had cave-like entrances, covered in white spikes she had to assume were bone, with entrances lit by dangling skull braziers hanging from chains covered in more spikes. Too far to see into the entrances, but demons came and went by the dozens, big ones and small ones, some she recognized some she didn't. More than a few times bat-like demons, skinny women about six feet tall with no arms, came wandering out of the spire, turned around, and climbed up the spire's side with their wing claws. Some hung upside down from the balcony overhead. One demon came out, a beast of a man that walked on all-fours despite probably being able to walk upright, and he looked their way. Like the satyr demons, he didn't have eyes, but instead had big horns that connected to the black bone covering where eyes would normally be. But the horns came out to the side, and his snout was long and came to a point. A shark? With horns?

Why wasn't anyone greeting them? Or rolling out the red carpet for Diogo, or doing anything to show they knew he was coming? Oh, right, because they didn't. Hell didn't have phones. Their arrival was a surprise, and plenty of demons stopped what they were doing to watch, probably trying to figure out why they'd come.

Mia did her best to keep her aura under control. Suppressing the tingling vibration in her was easy for the moment, considering the last thing on her mind right now was sex. The giant valley full of corpses on spikes, wandering and staring demons, and the enormous spire before her that looked like it might have come out of Hellraiser with a bloody makeover? All she felt was icy, stinging chills in her spine.

Closer and closer, until the spire stood towering over them. It was way too big. It had to be bigger than any skyscraper on Earth, but not wide enough to deal with a hard breeze. Not that it wasn't wide, but not wide enough for the insane height. But as they closed in on the final distance, she looked down at where the bone, flesh, and black stone of the spire's base sat on the ground. It didn't sit on the ground. It grew up from the ground.

And then they were inside. And Hell really showed herself.

Inside the spire, the world changed. Death's Grip was a huge province hundreds of kilometers wide as far as she could tell, and it was all cliffs, deadly jagged mountains and canyons, with ravines

filled with screaming dying remnants, and skull braziers, amber veins, and burning bushes keeping the province lit, not to mention the burning sky. But in the spire, it was a world of flesh, and bone, and sharp metal.

The enormous room, bigger than a hockey stadium — maybe as big as a football stadium? — was like the inverse of the outside of the tower, with a balcony along the inside, and a giant hole in the center, going both up, and down. The balconies on the spire's outside were spread out vertically, maybe a hundred meters between each, but on the inside, it looked like there were ten times as many inner balconies circling the big hole in the center. She and the group approached the inner edge of the balcony they stood on, it was clear there were far more inner balconies above her, hundreds... and far more below.

She sucked in a hard breath as she peeked over the edge of the balcony, and stared down into the pit. Down, and down, and down. If there was a bottom, she couldn't see it.

Adron pulled her back. "Careful."

"Oh... right." For just a second, fear of falling to her death had been replaced with awe. There were no railings. Each balcony, a flat platform circling around the giant hole in the middle of the tower, had short black spikes that came up at the edge, hardly protection from falling.

From the edges of the balconies, imps and grems hopped and glided up and down the balconies to different floors, and sometimes bigger demons did, too. Cages dangled by chains from the balcony edges, with demons often using them as jumping points or landing points as they went up and down. It was like the inside of Diogo's cave, except a thousand times worse. Inside the cages were one, two, sometimes six remnants, stacked against each other and clawing out against the air as they groaned. A few of them did more than groan. They called for help, with words, normal sounding words. Not all remnants? Humans locked into the cages maybe, left to die slowly?

The walls were a different story. Not metal, and the black stone was mostly covered by huge slabs of red that, yes, was actually pulsating muscle. She drifted toward the wall, and Diogo and the group let her, apparently distracted with their own chatter while Mia approached the tall surface of flesh and bone. White bone spikes jutted from the flesh, and around where the metal floor connected to the wall. Several remnants squirmed, bodies half merged into the flesh wall, and more than a few with a spike puncturing through their abdomens, but they weren't dying, yet. They weren't going anywhere.

The occasional amber vein cut along the flesh and white bone, but they were rare. The wall of flesh almost looked like it was trying to hide the amber, instead preferring to show flesh, and in certain



places, blood. The flesh wasn't perfect. It was cut and bleeding in certain places, or torn by bone spikes or the metal floor, or by a big metal hook that had a heartless demon corpse skewered on it.

"Creature," Diogo said.

Mia snapped around. Diogo was looking at her, Adron too, and everyone, and more. A dozen demons had shown up, some naked, some wearing armor and skulls, some wearing brown leather cloaks, some wearing some sort of white, partly see-through silk. More demons showed up, and more, and they all stared at her.

"Me?" Of course her.

"Follow." He gestured toward the path ahead of him, and he walked.

No point in arguing, and his heavy voice punched through her stupor like a slap. She jogged for a second, caught up, and walked behind the juggernaut brute as he moved toward what looked like a stairway in the flesh wall. A peek behind her solidified her worry. The others weren't coming, not even Adron.

Adron winked at her though, and waved at her, subtly with his claws but a wave everyone noticed anyway. He didn't think she was going up those stairs to die? Better than nothing.

The stairs weren't metal, or black stone. She'd figured they would be, but nope, she walked on big wide horizontal slabs of bone. Not fake bone, like something carved to look like it. It was bone. Her feet recognized the texture, and if she got down and licked it, it'd probably feel like the t-bone of a steak. Surprisingly pleasant to walk on, with a gripping texture that stopped her from slipping while also being much easier to walk on than metal or rocks. But, still, bone, ugh.

The stairway turned in a smooth half circle, connecting to the metal balcony above, where Diogo took another left and into another stairway. And then again on the next floor, and again. Sometimes she had to push aside dangling metal chains, and the skulls attached to them. Sometimes she had to fight her way past a remnant Diogo hadn't bothered killing for her. Sometimes a demon blocked the stairs by chance, and quickly stepped aside for Diogo, only to stare at her in confusion. And sometimes, a drop of blood fell onto the path, forcing her to look up at where the mix of flesh and stone didn't always play nice with the metal spikes.

Each time they reached the next floor, she looked across the metal balcony circling the big hole in the middle of the tower. There were rooms attached to the sides, with archway tunnels accepting demons into them. Sometimes she heard screaming coming from them. Sometimes moaning. Sometimes both.

Up and up and up. Diogo took his time, probably in no hurry to tire himself out scaling a colossal building like this. Mia's legs burned, though. Sweat dripped down her naked body, and she breathed hard. The smell of blood, either from the tower or from hungry demons, disappeared under her exhaustion. Walking kilometers upon kilometers for four days? Hard but doable. Scaling a skyscraper's worth of stairs? Hell's ultimate torture, reserved for only the most horrible, cruel humans.

Thankfully they didn't scale the whole thing. Maybe about halfway up, and Mia absolutely convinced her afterlife body was going to disintegrate from exhaustion and heat overload, they stopped. And it was obvious why. On the other side of the circling balcony, across the pit, was a giant skull. Black metal, with fire burning in its eyes, and mouth open. The skull was tilted and its mouth open wide, clearing maybe fifteen feet of height, meaning Diogo had no trouble stepping through it once they finally got to it.

She followed through, stepping over the sharp teeth poking up from the floor where the skull's jaw would have been if the balcony hadn't been there.

The spire's throne room made the big cave Diogo had look like a child's papier-mâché cosplay version. A large throne sat in the back of the huge room of metal and stone, something made of bone. It was an arrangement of bones made to fit the shape of a big, fancy throne, and even weirder, was some of the bones could have only fit that throne. The fuck sort of creature would have bones like that? No creature, that's what kind. They were throne bones.

The walls were mostly stone, with more amber veins Mia had oddly found herself missing. The floor was stone, with chunks of flat metal floor underneath, and fucking titanic rib bones poking up just enough she had to step over them. Cages with remnants inside dangled from the high ceiling. Black metal skull braziers hung from the cages. On the walls, more spikes jutted out, and a few humans and demons were skewered on them, in the process of dying... slowly. Oh god oh god oh god.

Diogo walked forward, casually stepping over the giant bones, past the big stone tables with blood and gore all over them, past the chairs made of bone complete with chair-specific bones, and past the huge pool off to one side that was absolutely blood. Thick blood, not like the Adam's Blood river. Heavy crimson blood that flowed down from the mouth of a giant white skull in the ceiling.

"Diogo," the demon woman on the throne said.

"Zelandariel," Diogo said, and he nodded. Deep nod. Fuck, that was a bow. For some reason, seeing the stoic, juggernaut brute bowing to someone, was scarier than the spire and all the horrors Mia had seen so far.

Zel stood up, and stepped down the shallow metal stairs down onto the stones in front of Diogo, and Mia slipped a few inches more behind the brute.

Zel was taller than him. Maybe a foot taller. She stood on black hooves, and while she had no tail or wings, she had four arms, each ending in an assortment of very large black claws. White silk draped over her, a few scarves of it that hung loosely and did a poor job of hiding her thin, fit physique, moderate breasts, and slab of abs. Her face was slim, sharp, and she had no nose. Four enormous black horns pulled up and away from her forehead, curling back over her skull like a strange, glorious, alien crown. From underneath her horns, long black hair tendrils dangled from her skull and reached past her ass, and considering how tall she was, that was damn long.

She was alien and beautiful and odd and majestic. And terrifying, especially with the strange, lightly glowing amber horn sticking straight up from her forehead. And she'd pierced the thick hair tendrils with bones, tiny ones. Finger bones? Human finger bones? Mia took a step back and—

“You,” Zel said, red and black demon eyes snapping to her, “are... not marked?” Slowly, the beautiful alien demon queen licked her lips.

Shit.