

~~David~~

The tunnels of Death's Grip shared the strange secrets of Hell in ways the mountaintops didn't. Sometimes the amber veins along the walls converged and circled a pile of bones where something nasty had happened. One case in particular showed a classic example of hate, with two demon skeletons strangling each other, and the remains of their skeletons locked in place by bloodgrip vine. Another display, locked in time by metal, showed four demons with swords skewering their chests in some sort of ritual the girls didn't know.

In some tunnels, statues grew, and one chamber held an assortment of tetrad demons, the center one apparently Valzanal, the old ruler of Death's Grip. She was surrounded by other tetrad, giant ten-foot-tall demons that made even Acelina look small. The males, gorujins and korgejins, had two giant wings, while the women, fujaras and bolstaras, had no wings but four arms. All the guys had their dicks out, fully grown, and plenty of them sat in positions that provided easy access to anyone that wanted to sit on them.

And for some reason, a lot of the lady tetrad had a penis, too.

La... La... one of the La gremlas hopped over on her hooves, giggled as she hugged one big demon's giant dick, and gave its tip a kiss. Gross, except not gross, not in Hell, where body residue never lasted. It was, essentially, a perfectly clean giant black metal dick. And about the same size as David's. Maybe a little smaller? Hello ego stroke.

Jes poked him with her tail and shook her head. Right, right, don't think about sex. Impas and gremlas were perfectly sexy in their strange, slim shortstack kinda way, and seeing all four of them giggle and hug and quick kiss while dancing around and between the legs of the tetrads was strangely fun. And exciting, hence, Jes poking him with the tail.

"Imps and grems can think maybe five minutes into the future at most," Jes said, behind him and lips next to his ear. "I know you want to fuck four sisters at once—"

"I don't—"

"But bad idea."

"You told me already."

"Then stop looking."

"They're our guides!"

Jes chuckled and gestured. “Our guides are obviously just trying to mess with you, David. You’re human, so they like you, want to fuck you, and want to eat you. They’re playful little bundles of destructive chaos. Remember that.”

“I am!”

Daoka leaned in over his other shoulder and clicked a few times.

“Dao’s right,” Jes said. “Think about—”

Caera, ahead of them along the path through the cavern, snarled back over her shoulder.

“Think about the fact we’re going to run into Cainites,” the tiger said, without bothering to whisper, “lots of them, with apparently hellfire-infused weapons. Think about the fact angels attacked us, on sight, are probably looking for ways to get into these tunnels right now, and the only reason they probably won’t find us is they don’t know these tunnels like our guides do.”

“Yes yes!” one of the impas said. “Trust Lasca.”

“Lasca, right.” Nodding, David picked up the pace a bit to catch up to the other impa. “Lasca, you—”

“I’m Laara!” She pointed back to the original impa. “That’s Lasca.”

“Oh.” Eyebrow raised, he turned to Lasca.

“I’m Lasca,” she said, nodding. Okay, confirmed, Lasca randomly talked about herself in the third person. Or maybe all impas and grems did that. The fuck did proper grammar matter to demons at all, he supposed.

“Lasca, you have any idea where the Cainites got the fire weapons?”

“Nope.”

“You’re sure?”

“Nope nope.”

“Uh, nope as in you’re not sure?”

She shook her head. “Nope nope nope.”

Yeap, he was overthinking this. He asked if she knew, she said nope, and was going to repeat the word if he asked about nuances.

“Okay. How about, these Cainites that suddenly started using dangerous weapons. Do you know where they came from?”

“Cainites everywhere! Claimed all the tunnels.”

All the tunnels? Gulp.

“Any place where they’re grouped up? Lots of them together?”

“Does it matter?” Caera asked, catching up to them. “We keep killing them until we find the ones that killed Kia and Marquez.” After a long growl, the tiger lady glanced back at the tetrad statues and the bones that surrounded them, growled, brushed some bones aside with her tail, and prowled alongside David. No matter what he said, nothing could penetrate the new angry shell Caera wore. Maybe Mia could, but David was more likely to accidentally throw gasoline on the fire than anything else.

“Dozens of them!” Lasca said, turning and walking backward. “Dangerous!”

The new tunnels they walked had little bloodgrip vine, and the imps and grems felt comfortable hopping around, making noise, and being silly. Caera did not appreciate that. She growled, and the spikes along her back and spine stuck up a little straighter.

“Then we just be smart about how we approach and kill them,” Caera said. “We find a secluded group, kill them, David dresses up in their gear, we use him as a distraction, and keep killing every group we run into.”

It wasn’t the best plan, but it was a plan, and plans seemed to be something most demons didn’t bother with or cared for. Humans, on the other hand, sometimes used them, and since Cainites were souls that’d worked together to survive Hell, they might be just a bit too smart to be so easily tricked. Then again, the two he’d met before, the ones who’d jumped Jes and Dao, they’d been suicidally hungry and depraved. They hadn’t behaved human, or even sounded human. More like, psychotic cannibal raiders. Which, they were, now that he thought about it.

“It matters,” David said, “because a group of souls suddenly having access to weapons you can’t normally get, is weird. The timing is weirder. If we don’t do this right, we’ll all get killed. I was hoping we’d get a little more time to figure things out, but I know, I know, we can’t take forever with angels on our ass.”

He very very carefully stepped around the fact that this whole excursion was a detour they didn’t really need to do. Everyone was on board to go to False Gate and then the Forgotten Place, and this trip

was purely to help Caera with something completely unconnected. He'd promised he'd help, and he would, but they didn't have time for this.

Judging from the glare Caera gave him over her shoulder, she knew that, and knew he was thinking about it.

"Lasca," he said, "you know a place where the Cainites patrol? Maybe just a few of them?"

"Patrol." She scratched a horn. "Patrol..." Did she know what patrol meant? "Five stay together. Walk in circle. Tunnel below us." Yeap, she did.

"Think we can sneak up on them?"

"Maybe! Very dangerous." Her big eyes lowered to the ground, and she stopped. "Lot of demons dead. Dead friends."

Friends? He almost said it out loud, but glanced at Jes instead. She shrugged. Friendship wasn't exactly common in Hell, and according to her, imps and grems were crazy volatile. What friendship meant to an imp or grem, he didn't know, and neither did Jes. But Lasca certainly looked sad, and with her big eyes, he couldn't help but get sucked into the obvious depression dripping from the mini gargoyle.

But then she stood up straight, put on a big shark smile that would have given Acelina a run for her money, and saluted him.

"We find! We kill! Then kill leader!"

"You know where their leader is?"

"No. Maybe. Far from here. Kilomiles clockwise."

"Kilomiles?" he asked.

Lasca nodded with the utmost confidence, but didn't explain. Okay, kilomiles. He could work with that.

He looked back at Acelina. Even with the tunnels opening up and spreading out, the nine-foot-tall demoness had to be careful with every step, either to keep her long wings from snagging on anything, or to keep her steps quiet, something she'd never had to do in the spire. That wasn't so bad, except that the woman had a hundred cuts on her legs, and a hundred on her wings, some going clear through the membrane. She'd only recently stopped bleeding.

He slowed down until he walked beside her, with everyone else ahead of them.

“You okay?” he asked.

After aiming her featureless face down at him for a few silent seconds, she sighed and scoffed.

“Marvelous.” The sarcasm was deadly.

“Still want to journey with us?”

“Of course not. Do you have any idea how terrible angels are, little soul?”

“I mean, a little? Two of them—”

“If given the chance, and the room to maneuver, a single angel can defeat a tetrad demon in combat.” She gestured to one of the giant statues looming over them as they walked past.

“Fucking yikes.” He stopped for a second to gulp and look the tetrad up and down. A korgejin, which meant giant wings, hooves, no tail, and one of those classic demony skull-like faces, complete with a lot of scary teeth. “The angels I saw were barely bigger than humans. Except... that one big one I saw right at the gate.”

Acelina shivered.

“I have never seen such a creature,” she said, “but Zelandariel mentioned the angels of the council before. She has never... had never seen one either.”

Wincing, he nodded and kept his eyes ahead.

“You going to leave us, then, when we get out of this tunnel?”

“To what end? That would be suicide. I am no tetrad. I am a spire mother. What chance do I have against the outside world and its elements and denizens?”

“Well, I mean...” He gestured up at her. Walking side by side, his head hovered around her hips and waist. She was a big lady.

“My size and strength will do little to aid me against a swarm of Cainites, or hungry demons.”

“I dunno. Jes says you can create some really powerful sin auras, too?”

“More powerful than yours, for certain.” She scoffed again and aimed her face down at him. “Your strange auras are but ticklish things compared to what I can craft.”

He smiled back up at her. “Yeah?”

“Indeed. I could have most of the spire itself buried in either suicidal violence, or an orgy of unending proportions, if I so chose. The sin auras of the others are nothing compared to mine.”

He tried to keep his smile under control, but something about Acelina being angry, uptight, and boastful made him happy. Apparently, the zotiva was her most comfortable when being a royal bitch, and insulting him and the other girls brought some zip and pep back to her voice. It also meant she got to spend a few more seconds not paying so much attention to the pain she was probably in.

It passed quickly, and she hissed as she held out one of her long wings in front of her. With gentle claws, she traced the holes, earning more hisses.

“How long will you take to heal?” he asked. “I mean, assuming you can heal that.”

“I can. Given time, a demon can heal almost any wound.”

“Yeah?” He looked to Caera. She was far ahead enough she probably didn’t hear them whisper. Hopefully. “I guess spire seals are different.”

She looked down at him again. “You tell me. You are the unmarked. Your kind can read the ancient language, and can understand and recognize the symbols of the spire.”

“My kind? Five weeks ago, I was just a regular human. The most boring human alive, I’ll have you know.” He waved a hand. “I wanted to know if you were doing okay, that’s all. We’re all pretty banged up, but you got really ripped up in there.”

Again she aimed her head down at him, and with her mouth closed, her face was nothing but a black, featureless mask. Eventually, she looked ahead again, but it was a little while longer before she responded.

“I am hurt. But I will be fine.”

“Good.”

She tilted her head enough she was probably looking at him, but he couldn’t be certain. Whatever reason she had to glance his way, she stayed silent, looked forward again, and the two of them walked side by side without saying a word.

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~~Mia~~

Vin fell and fell hard. An electric jolt through the body was not something you could ever get used to, and if the spire leash was anything like that, every muscle in Vin's body was going haywire while pain simultaneously overloaded his brain. From the half gargled roars and giant muscle twitches, that was exactly what he was going through, and he collapsed onto all four hands as his knee spikes rubbed their blunt sides against the stone.

Azreal fell with him, and landed on the ground hard, too. A single flap of his wings was all he managed before his boots hit the stone, and the weight of his armor and shield cracked the ground around him. He knelt there, panting and coughing up blood, leaning weight onto his shield and his spear with its grip planted on the ground. Poor guy.

Mia held onto her bodyguard's back spikes long enough for Vin to land before she hopped off. Oh god, she'd made a big mistake. Blood poured from Vin's shoulder where Shir had stabbed through him, and a pool of the red liquid quickly spread from under Vin's arm, not to mention the holes in one of his hands and legs. His tail was even worse off, a huge gash several feet long from near the tip down the thick length. Angel swords were sharp.

Or, angels were just that powerful. The weapons weren't real, physical, metal things. Azreal's spear had poofed out of existence when Vin had grabbed it, and reappeared in his hand. And Shir's sword, shield, and armor were all gone.

The runes in Mia's brain shined brightly and danced in her eyes, three in particular: potram, royam, and batlam. Batlam swam around in her thoughts, brushing the other runes aside, and demanded her attention. It only grew brighter the closer she got to the angel.

She clutched her necklace, and the amber arc vanished. Vin stopped half choking on his roars, but stayed on his hands and knees, panting like a wild animal. The first time Mia used the necklace on purpose, and it might just get her killed if the angels took advantage. Thankfully, they were all just as beat up as Vin, Noah behind them struggling to get up with blood leaking out of various spots in his armor, Shir flat on her chest, and Azreal stuck in his kneeling position as his blood also leaked out from his boots.

Mia sucked in a deep breath, got down on a knee, and pushed Shir over enough to look at her face.

"Oh thank god," she said. "Still alive." Alive and ridiculously beautiful. It was almost unfair how beautiful, a young woman's face with the perfectly symmetrical features you expected to find on a fashion magazine cover. Combined with her muscular-but-feminine perfect body, and now that Mia got an incidental chance to peek, her rather busty body, it truly was hilariously unfair. The fact she had

green — emerald — eyes, red hair, and freckles, was too much, and Mia couldn't help but chuckle weakly as she and the angel traded gazes again.

Warm. The angel's bare shoulder was warm.

“Why?” Shir asked.

“Why? Because... Because! I don't know what's going on or why everyone's trying to kill me, but...” But what? She saw in Shir's eyes, and in Noah and Azreal's eyes, that they didn't want to kill her, and because Mia was a weak-willed, overly empathetic and sensitive little girl, she couldn't let Vin kill them. “Because I don't want to hurt anyone.”

Vin snarled and shot her a deadly look, but his attempt to get up failed as much as Noah's. Only Azreal had the foresight to stop trying to move when all it did was make him bleed more.

“No one's told me what's going on,” Mia said. “No one! But I'm not going to just let myself get killed, either.”

“Even if—” Noah coughed, and a splatter of blood hit the ground. Vin had thoroughly destroyed the man's insides with his hammering blows. “Even if you spell the doom of the Great Tower?”

“Even if I...” She turned and stared at Noah. “Even if I what?”

The angel flapped his burned wings until he was up on his feet, and continued to do so, only one foot touching the ground and only with the tip of a toe. He couldn't land, and blood dripped from the boot. No wounds on the outside Mia could see, but it was a wonder the angel wasn't a flat piece of roadkill.

“The council has sent scouting parties to find and kill the unmarked,” Noah said, “as you surmised.” He hovered closer, and Mia took a step closer to Vin, but her bodyguard was still panting and trembling. If it wasn't for Noah also trembling and struggling to keep sword and shield in hand, he'd probably go for her. “And, as you surmised, it is a life or death matter.”

Well, at least they were having a conversation now, even as Noah slowly came closer and closer. Yeap, he was going to try and kill her if he got the chance. So she slipped under Vin's chest and kept him between her and Noah, while keeping Azreal in the corner of her eye.

“So you think I'll destroy the Great Tower? The, uh, everything everything tower?”

Noah frowned, paused over Shir, and gently lowered himself down beside her. The relief on his face was blatant, and he patted the woman on her shoulder once as he checked her wounds. Finally, someone else with a little empathy.

“I trust the council,” he said, flapping his blackened wings again until he was a few feet in the air. Slowly, he pointed his shaking sword at Mia, and ignored the blood trail he left behind him. “Submit, for the sake of us all.”

She stomped her foot. “Did the council tell you the unmarked are going to destroy the Great Tower?”

Noah said nothing, but he hardened his silver eyes as he stared at her. He still had his helmet on, but like when Shir had hers, the front of it was open enough she could see his face, the perfect stubble, and bits of dark blond hair hidden along the sides of his jaw. The lack of expression or response was her answer.

“The will of the council is clear,” he said at last. “We—” A shudder worked through him, a small puff of gold lit the area, and his shield disappeared. Snarling, he flapped his wings a little harder, but his weight dragged him down again, and his toe touched the ground once more. “Azrael. Kill her.”

Mia half squeaked and jumped back. Azreal had, at some point, lifted his spear and pointed it at her. Suddenly, his kneeling position didn’t look so much like he was recovering from getting smashed into cliff walls half a dozen times, but like he was getting ready to leap at Mia and stab her.

But he didn’t. Azreal didn’t have his helmet on anymore, and if what was happening to Noah was any explanation, he didn’t have the energy to resummon it. There was nothing stopping Mia from staring at the man, his short and messy dark hair, clean shaven tan skin, and purple eyes. Amethyst eyes stared right back at her, but fell as something heavy pulled them downward.

“Azreal!” Noah yelled.

Mia stood beside Vin, the beast still on hands and knees, head mostly facing toward Azreal. All Azreal had to do was leap around Vin to get to Mia. He didn’t.

“She’s not like the other one,” Azreal said.

“It doesn’t matter. We have to end her.”

Azreal looked to Noah, and then to Vin. The demon lifted his head enough to glare at Azreal, only maybe fifteen feet between them, as he lifted a colossal leg and put his weight on his talons again. He fared no better than Noah, and a fresh wave of blood gushed from his wounds as he failed to get back to his feet. Fuck.

“I will deal with the ragarin first,” Azreal said, standing up. Double fuck.

“You can’t kill him!” Mia yelled. “I need him. He... He’s my protector.”

Azreal shook his head and held his spear out at arm's length in front of him.

“He’s a child of the Old Ones. An abomination.”

“He’s my bodyguard! I need him!”

“He—”

A roar cut through the ravine. Vin’s? No. It didn’t come from any of the angels, either.

Everyone looked up as a pair of giant bat-like wings with black fingers and a red membrane descended on them. A demon. A really, really big demon. Not Vin big, but a ten-foot-tall demon with a wingspan at least double that was still big enough it cast them all in a blurry shadow as the tetrad fell upon them.

Whoever they were, they wore bits of meera metal on their body, bent chunks held on by leather straps, and they wielded a colossal black sword in hand. Like the armor, it was the most crude weapon Mia had ever seen, a mess of black blades someone had smashed together into a big, thick sword.

A gorujin tetrad. Mia had never seen one before, but there was no chance she wouldn’t recognize one. Similar to korgejins, but gorujins had raptorial feet and a tail. Similar faces, too, demony and skull-ish. The one coming down at them was no different, a giant of a creature with several dozen skulls dangling from chains hanging from his waist and other bits of his armor.

He landed hard, directly in front of Azreal, and roared down at the angel as he spread his wings like he was issuing a challenge, and bathed the angel in shadow. Azrael froze. Afraid? No, but from the look on his face, he was completely caught off guard.

“Wh-What?” Mia asked. “What—”

More noises. Mia spun around, and her heart sank as an array of horns poked around the curve of the battle-charred ravine behind them. Then her heart jumped as four incubi came into view. Faust!

“Romakus!” Noah yelled. “You—”

More movement came down from on high. White movement. Oh no.

The tetrad gorujin — Romakus, apparently — jumped back and landed beside Vin, opposite of Mia, as a new set of angel wings landed between the two big demons and the three angels. A woman, wearing the same sort of armor as Noah and what Shir had worn, and she wielded the same sword and shield. She glared at Romakus as she pointed her sword at him, and her obsidian eyes held concentrated malice. Dark skin, but the helmet hid her hair.

Chuckling, Romakus spun his sword around a few times in a flourish.

“I was distracted,” he said, voice a playful, bassy purr. “You should have struck me down.”

“You weren’t distracted,” the woman said. “Your feint would have worked, if I had attacked. But I am no fool.” She tilted her head enough to look past him at the incubi in the back, who now scaled the ravine walls with their much, much lighter-than-Vin weight. Soon they stood on vantage points up high. “Noah. Azreal. Shir.”

“Yosepha,” Noah said.

“We should retreat.”

Noah grimaced. “We can’t—”

“Listen to her,” another voice called. Everyone looked up. Oh god no, not another one. Whoever this fifth angel was, they hovered far above them, and had a beautiful bow drawn with a shining arrow in hand. Their armor wasn’t nearly as thick as the others, and their helmet did nothing to cover any part of their face. Bits of white silk flowed from the armor joints.

Wait, what was it Vin had said? Mikalem, rapholem, and gabriem? Three kinds of angels?

“What’re you two doing here?” Azreal asked, never taking his eyes off Romakus.

“Rescuing your impulsive ass,” the angel above said. “More are on the way.” He gestured to the four incubi getting closer, each taking their time and making sure they kept a healthy amount of rock and stone between them and the angels.

An angel, saying ass? The other ones talked super officially and all high-and-mighty and whatnot. Not the one with the bow.

Azreal and Noah shared a glance, Noah borderline growling, Azreal silent and waiting.

Noah wasn’t so easily deterred.

“Shoot the unmarked, Galon!”

“Try,” Romakus said, chuckling as he held out a wing, blocking much of Vin’s body, and thus Mia.

“Enough,” Yosepha said. “Galon is right. Azreal, help Shir. I’ll cover you.”

Noah grit his teeth. “You can’t—”

The sounds of clinking metal cut him off. The incubi each took their swords, and tapped them to the ground in unison and on a beat, creating an almost tribal sound as they smiled at the angels. How oddly unsettling.

“She’s right,” Azreal said. “We took too long. We must retreat.” With an almost subtle shine of gold light, the giant shield and spear Azreal wielded disappeared, and he scooped Shir up into his arms. He struggled. From the way he walked, he probably had a dozen broken ribs, but he held the woman in his arms horizontal, and took to the air, regardless. He struggled with that, too, as if he weighed a million pounds, but he managed.

Yosepha stayed with him, shield up and sword pointing, and her nearly black eyes glared daggers down at Romakus and Vinicius. She didn’t want to leave. She wanted to fight. Only when she had some distance on them, hovering high in the air where the demons couldn’t reach, did Yosepha finally look at Mia.

That was a strange look. She didn’t have the same ‘I must kill you to save the world’ look in her eyes Noah had. If anything, she looked sad. Or maybe regretful?

Mia took a breath she didn’t realize she’d been waiting on for the past minute, and rested on Vin’s shoulder as she looked around at the chaos. The angels went up and up, until their white wings blurred into the fire sky, high enough they touched the flames. They didn’t seem to mind, and flew off toward the vortex.

“Um, hi,” Mia said, and she offered the giant gorujin a small wave. He was small compared to Vin, but a ten-foot-tall demon with mega wings was a fucking giant compared to Mia. Best to be respectful. And looking up at him sent an all-too-familiar chill down her spine.

It only got worse when he turned and looked at her. The classic demony skull-ish face was common in Hell, but his big, happy psycho smile was not.

“Hi,” he said.

“Um...” She gulped and glanced back at the incubi, who were coming to join them. Join them, and not eat them, based on the casual way they were walking. “I’m Mia. You... saved me?”

“I did save you.” He turned around completely to face her, hooked his wings snug to his back, stabbed his sword into the ground, and leaned on it like it was a fancy cane, complete with crossing one leg over the other at the ankle. If he’d had a cup of tea in hand, or a top hat on, it would have fit. What the fuck.

Vin, rumbling and growling, turned his head enough to glare at Mia, and the rage in them sent yet another chill through her. But she glared right back at him. She would not be intimidated by her bodyguard. Romakus, on the other hand, full intimidation completely warranted.

“Th-Thank you,” she said.

Romakus blinked at her, twice, and laughed.

“Holy shit, Galon was right. You unmarked really don’t belong here in Hell.”

“Galon... the angel? What?”

The tetrad winked. “Galon met your brother. Yosepha, too. Told me he was a softy, like he’d walked right out of a scrying pool.” Shrugging, Romakus gestured to the incubi with a wing. “You were right, Gallius.”

Gallius stood beside Faustinus, and both of them gave Mia perfect, sexy smiles.

“I’m just glad we told you in time,” Gallius said.

Romakus shrugged. “I was already chasing the angels. I would have shown up in time.”

“Maybe,” Faust said. “Yosepha probably didn’t like you doing that, did she?”

“She doesn’t like anything I do. That’s part of the fun.”

Mia threw up her hands. “What is going on!? I... I... what? Someone—” Vin fell over. Mia outright squeaked as the titan fell on his side, almost straight on her toes. “Shit! Vin, I’m sorry! I didn’t think... I mean, I didn’t...”

On his side, breathing and grunting, Vin let out a long sigh and glared up at Romakus.

“A vulture, come to eat me?”

“Oh I’d love to, believe me. But I saw what happened. You’re bound to the unmarked girl, right?” He stepped around Vin and smiled down at Mia. “I could just take that necklace, and make you my bitch, couldn’t I?”

Vinicius growled, but each attempt to push himself back up to his feet failed. Using the leash on him when he had so many nasty wounds did a number on him, and now Mia was defenseless. Wonderful.

“You... could take the necklace,” Mia said. “But you won’t, right?” Cue her best big, cute, innocent smile.

“I won’t,” Romakus said, licking a fang. “For now.”

“And, you um... you know those two angels?”

“He does,” Faust said.

“And you—wait. Vinicius. I need to help him. He’s bleeding and—”

“He’ll be fine,” Romakus said. “Faust told me he’d gotten a full meal earlier. He’ll heal, with time.” Leaving his sword behind, he reached down, grabbed one of Vin’s arms, and yanked him up to sitting. He was not gentle, and Vinicius snarled straight at the demon. If he’d been feeling better, he’d probably have incinerated the gorujin right there. “He’s pretty fucked up, enough that I’d be worried for my life, but a child of the Old Ones? He’ll recover. He’ll be hungry again, but he’ll recover.”

Romakus talked weirdly. He talked... like a modern human, a young one.

“Good, good.” Sighing, Mia came around and stood in front of Vin, straight between his legs, ignored the blood pool under her feet, and glared up at him. “I’m sorry. I know, it was stupid of me to stop you from killing those angels. They would have killed me. We got lucky we were saved.”

“Luck had nothing to do with it,” Gallius said.

She spun around and glared at the incubus.

“So I’m seeing!” she yelled. “Someone please explain to me what’s going on!?” For some reason, she felt yelling was the best course of action.

Gallius blinked at her, and even took a small step back. Romakus, on the other hand, laughed, a little too hard. It was weird seeing the big, scary demon with all the skulls dangling from his waist, be the very human and very... eccentric demon, when four incubi all stood only ten feet away.

“Romakus works for the Damall,” Faust said. “So do we. We were following you. Romakus was following the three angels. Then he spotted us, and we were talking nearby when the fight started.”

“Damall?” she asked.

“Long story,” Romakus said. “Needless to say, we don’t want angels killing the unmarked.”

“And, um, Yosepha and Galon?”

“Friends,” Faust said. “Sort of? They were nearby, too, hiding from the angels and doing their own... private scouting missions. They joined Romakus a few days ago, before he ran into us moments before now.”

“Wait. So, Yosepha showing up right after Romakus saved us? That was...”

“Theater,” Romakus said. “I’m a good actor, aren’t I?”

“She looked like she wanted to kill you!”

“Oh, she does want to kill me.” With another big, hearty chuckle, the giant squatted down in front of Mia. Even squatting, he was still taller than her. “But she won’t. She likes my dick too much.”

“Likes your...” She forced herself to look the crazy demon in the eyes. “You... and the angel?” There was confidence on his face, playful charm, and for a second, he seemed all too similar to Adron. Gorujin and vrats even had similar faces. But, unlike Adron, this Romakus dripped with the same sort of innate assurance a movie serial killer did, complete with the solid eye contact they might use on a potential target. It was unnerving.

“You don’t think an attractive demon like me can bag an angel?” With a scoff, he touched his chest and stood up. “You wound me!”

“I... I...” Okay, Mister Romakus was chaos incarnate. She’d have to be careful with him. “I’m still confused about all this. A few angels dropped on us out of nowhere, and they were... scouts? Why would they do that? Why not bring an army?”

“Angels are deadly,” Faust said, “but only when they have room to maneuver. If you saw a hundred thousand white wings in the sky, what would you have done?”

“Hid, deep in the tunnels, I suppose.”

“Exactly. The last thing an angel wants to do is deal with demons inside the tunnels, so they usually have small scout groups out and about, doing... things.” Faust shrugged and gestured to Romakus.

“Don’t ask me,” Romakus said. “Yosepha doesn’t tell me nothing.”

Gallius laughed. “Don’t believe Romakus. Ever.”

“I am a bastion of truth.”

All four incubi rolled their eyes.

“Anyway,” Faust said, “there’s been scouting parties exploring Death’s Grip, and maybe even all of Hell, for over a month. We didn’t know they’d be willing to die for their orders, though. Even Yosepha didn’t see that coming.”

“Okay,” Mia said. “Angels are going around in scouting parties and ambushing... unmarked?”

“You tell us,” Romakus said. “In fact, you can tell us everything, once we’re out of sight. More angels will come.”

“But, Vin, he’s injured. And... really injured. I... I made it worse, and—”

Something she said made the giant demon laugh again, but it carried some surprise, too, and he raised an eyebrow as he looked at her. Only when she glared up at him did he stop laughing.

“Why do you care about a child of Belial?” Romakus came closer again, and squatted down only a foot from her this time. She held her ground. “That spire leash of yours—”

“It’s not about the leash. Vin is helping me.”

Romakus looked past her up at Vin. Vinicius rumbled, but said nothing, every breath a labored mess.

“Helping you—”

“I told you,” Faust said. “She won’t say.”

“Then maybe I’ll make her say.” Romakus licked his big fangs, smiling at her. She held her glare. “Or maybe not. Either way, the ragarin will survive the trip, unmarked. He’s survived worse.”

Mia looked down at the ground, and the pooling blood that continued to grow. Guilt sucked.

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Mia sighed as she watched her bodyguard bleed. Twice now he’d gotten into a deadly fight because of her, and this second time his wounds were partly her fault, or at least made worse by her. Using the leash hurt Vin, a lot. Using the leash after he’d been stabbed through the hand, stabbed through his very thick shoulder, stabbed in the leg, and had his tail filleted like a fish, had fucked him up bad. Even with the ravine way behind them, the sensation of Vin’s blood soaking her feet rubbed guilt into her skin with a cheese grater.

She looked up at him, but he ignored her. No need to say it. He was angry with her, and having to lean — literally — on Romakus as they walked was probably salt in his wounds. It didn’t seem like they knew each other, or at least not well, but still, big demons had big egos, and needing a tetrad’s help was probably worse than the wounds. If anything, Vinicius enjoyed the fight with the angels, wounds and all, and wanted to fight again.

The angels. He’d known the two men. And he hadn’t hesitated to rip the wings off the third.

“Romakus,” Mia said. “Can angels regrow their wings?”

“Yeah, with time. That angel won’t be flying soon, though.”

She sighed relief and sat down on the ground. They’d entered a big cave, something deep in a ravine, and from how smooth the ground and walls were, with no bloodgrip or remnants nearby, it was a cave demons used frequently. That would have been a bad thing, but Romakus and the four incubi had taken her and her bodyguard straight there, so hopefully it was safe. Not like they needed to bring Mia and Vin into a trap or anything, defenseless as they were.

“You know this cave?” she asked.

“I do. All Damall do.” With a heavy groan, Romakus and the four incubi helped Vin sit down against the tunnel wall, not far from Mia. “Volarins, keep an eye on the Belial spawn.”

“Sure thing,” one incubus said. “Wanna send Julisa our way?”

“She’s not going to fuck you, Locutus,” Romakus said with a big grin.

The incubus grinned right back at him.

“I meant so Vinicius doesn’t eat us while we keep an eye on the cave entrance,” he said.

Romakus laughed as he gave a small hand wave, turned, and started further down the cave.

“Come with me, unmarked. I’ll introduce you to my friends.”

Oh no. She got up and looked Vin’s way, but the child of Belial looked away, preferring to keep his eyes on the twist and turns that led back out of the cave. Or just, preferring to not look at her.

Much as she wanted to be strong and simply accept that Vin could — and would — be angry with her, she couldn’t let it go. His job was to keep her alive, but the thought of crossing Hell with Vin hating her made her nauseous. She knew that was dumb, but damn it, she wanted cooperation. She wanted her and Vin to get along.

She wanted him to not be a horrible monster.

Romakus walked ahead, tail slithering behind him, and Mia forced herself to catch up. Think about Vinicius later.

“Who’re we talking to?”

“Some members of the Damall are hanging out here for now.”

“For now?”

“We don’t stay in one place very long. The spire ruler usually catches wind and tries to have us killed. But I suppose with Zel out of the way, we’re safe for now, at least in Death’s Grip.”

She gulped. “And, um, the Damall? What’re they about? You didn’t tell me much.”

Romakus grinned over his shoulder at her and gave his wings a little flourish. Tail, too.

“You need to learn to control your tongue, you know. A lot of demons would kill you for speaking out of turn.”

“I... got that, yeah. Can’t help it.”

She did her best to ignore the skulls bouncing against his legs. Fail. Most of them were demon, tigers and brutes, and one of them was huge, maybe another tetrad. At least a dozen of them were human. It was a lot of skulls, dangling from black chains, with a few of them hanging from bits of his armor across his back or chest, or from the base of his wings at the shoulder.

David would have said he looked badass or awesome. Sure, he kinda did. He even looked hot, in that scary-but-sexy monster kinda way Adron did. Big teeth. But, at the moment, the only thing on Mia’s mind was the big tetrad potentially taking her to a fate worse than death.

“The Damall are a group that likes things the way they are.”

“The way they are? But—” She sucked in a breath as some sounds in the distance cut her off. Remnants. Sighing, she hugged her arms tight to her body, and made sure her ripped and borderline ruined silk wrap didn’t drag too far behind her. Keeping it snug around her body was getting harder the more ruined it got, and threads trailed on the ground where a remnant might grab one.

The screams became a choir. Sure enough, the tunnel tightened until Romakus had to crouch, and a couple dozen... hundred... thousand remnants, emaciated and tortured souls, made it a million times worse. The demon didn’t care. He used his claws, talons, and tail to carve a path through the poor people without so much as a glance for the bodies.

Mia did her best to avoid the gore, but it was pointless. A path of blood and organs followed behind Romakus, and she followed it, eyes on his tail and wings and the increasing blood spatter.

Remnants didn’t just grow in random places. If there were so many of them here, something important had happened here. Or, something was happening?

The tunnel opened up, and Mia sucked in a breath as she looked up and around at the huge cavern. Remnants hung from the walls, from the ceiling, from everywhere, but the room was so ridiculously massive, their screams were distant. Giant stalactites and stalagmites decorated the cave, each maybe twenty or thirty feet tall, and they broke up the sound enough it didn’t penetrate her ears so deeply. It was even quiet enough that the sounds of nearby talking reached her.

“Hey Livian. Julisa,” Romakus said as he stepped around a stalagmite.

Mia followed him, and froze.

“Zel!” Mia spun, and ran.

And got a whole two feet before a big set of claws grabbed her shoulder and pulled her down on her ass. Romakus. He was not gentle.

Mia rolled over and stared up at the bolstara tetrad, but after a few seconds of some awkward staring from the two of them, Mia relaxed, mostly. It wasn't Zel. Zel had long demon dreadlocks. Whoever this bolstara was, she kept her dreadlocks shorter, and she didn't have any piercings or jewelry.

“A bolstara could take offense to that,” the demon said as she reached down, picked Mia up, and set her on her feet. “Do we all look the same to you?”

“Um...”

The demon laughed and shook her head. Like Romakus, she wore bits of black armor, enough to cover both breasts and stomach, and a bit of her arms and legs. And just like Romakus, it wasn't fancy or polished or well structured. Someone had taken some meera metal, bent chunks of it into shape with a big hammer or rock, and figured out ways to attach leather straps to it and get it on the body.

She also had four swords, to go with her four arms. With hooves, a tiny waist, muscular but feminine shape, and four big black horns, she did look a lot like Zel.

The other woman was a tetrad too, and one Mia hadn't seen yet. A fujara, another female demon with four arms, except she had raptorial feet and a tail. Just like how the two male tetrad breeds were similar in that they had wings, female tetrads were similar in that they both had four arms, and she had the same armor setup, too.

“Unmarked,” the Zel-look-alike said.

“M-Mia. I'm Mia.”

The demon grinned. “Livian.”

“Julisa,” the fujara said. “So this is the unmarked.” With a predator grin, Julisa squatted down in front of Mia, and tested her talons on the ground like a bird nestling on a branch. “Cute little thing.” Unlike her companion, Julisa was bald, but considering tetrads had four big black horns, she almost looked like she was wearing a crown.

“Um... thank you.”

“How’d you catch her, Romakus?”

Romakus squatted down behind Mia, chuckling and grinning as he did. Mia did her best to not shiver.

“The rumor was true. The unmarked girl escaped the spire, and she’s been traveling with Zel’s prisoner.”

The bolstara Livian also squatted down in front of Mia on her hooves, beside the fujara, effectively surrounding Mia in a very awkward triangle.

“You have Vinicius?” she asked, looking at Mia.

“I... do.” She clutched her necklace.

“She’s got him on a spire leash,” Romakus said.

Both demon ladies gasped in a playful, girlish gossip kinda way. All three of these tetrad were quirky.

“Where is the ragarin?” Julisa asked.

“Closer to the spire-bound entrance,” Romakus said. “Very injured. He had a run in with angels, and Yosepha and I had to rescue him.”

“Vinicius is injured?” The fujara moved to stand up, but Romakus waved her back down.

“He’s not going to remember you, Julisa.”

“Says you. I’m very memorable.”

Mia tilted her head slightly. Unless she was going crazy, that was a little desire in the big demon woman’s eyes, like, maybe she liked Vinicius and wanted to go see him? Or eat him?

She walked off, tail swaying, hips swaying too, and she gave a tiny wave over her shoulder with two of her four hands, before disappearing into the tunnel full of remnants.

One less tetrad in close proximity gave Mia enough mental capacity to look around a bit more, especially as other sounds she hadn’t noticed died off, and movement cropped up around the big rocks nearby. Other demons. No more tetrads, but there were a few vrats and gargoyles, a few brutes, one tiger, and a couple minotaurs and bat girls. The minotaurs — borjins — and bat girls — dilojas — stayed behind the others, peeking around rocks and brute muscles to get a look at Mia. Curious, or hungry.

“You’re all a part of the Damall?” Mia asked, gesturing.

“Wow, she’s bold,” Livian said. “She just outright asks questions.”

“I like it,” Romakus said. “Too many souls afraid to talk.”

“I wonder why,” Mia said, glaring at the two giant demons.

Livian whistled. Like Zel, she had one of those beautiful, but oddly alien faces, with a subtle nose that almost didn’t exist, giving her a mask-like quality. Seeing her whistle was strange. Romakus, of course, laughed, and seeing his big crazy predator smile on his demony face was the opposite of strange at this point.

“You’re correct. We’re all part of the Damall,” he said.

“And... you demons... keep things from changing?”

“Yeap.”

“What’s that mean?”

He shrugged. “Demons killing demons. The spires fighting each other. A never-ending buffet of souls getting dumped on our doorstep. Even souls getting uppity, grouping up, fighting back, inevitability joining that Cain cult. That’s the status quo. That’s good.”

“Good?”

He leaned in close, close enough she could have punched him in his big mouth. Like Vinicius, his breath didn’t smell bad, but there was no mistaking the scent of blood.

“Hell has a pretty good system down here. The angels leave us alone, and we get to fight, fuck, and everything between, all the time.”

“B-But... demons die. All the time! You kill each other, all the time!”

“We do,” Livian said, leaning in closer, too. “And we like it that way.”

Mia frowned and folded her arms across her chest, but didn’t snap back. There wasn’t any point in trying to make demons understand they didn’t have to be so mean and cruel to each other, or even to the souls they were going to eat. And much as the thought of it sent painful needles through her limbs, she had to abandon the idea that people should be nice to each other innately. This was Hell, and it had different rules, even if she didn’t like them.

“So, the problem,” Romakus said, standing back up, “is there’s been a lot of changing going on. Last time that happened, it was because a child of the Old One Abaddon held False Gate, and got it into

his stupid, thick skull that he could challenge Heaven. Angels came down, slaughtered demons by the tens of thousands, and stirred the pot so bad it was centuries before Hell settled back into its usual patterns. And power vacuums are always problematic.”

“But,” Livian said, standing up as well, “that’s nothing compared to a giant crack splitting an entire province of Hell in half. And it did split in half, all the way from the inner shore to the outer edge.”

Mia gulped. “Wow.”

“The reason you’re still alive,” Romakus said, “is because we need to know what happened.”

“That’s... the only reason?”

“Well, that, and because the angels are trying to kill the unmarked. Which makes me want to know what’s so special about you. If the angels want you dead, maybe I should help them, or maybe I should stop them. I don’t know yet.” He gestured to her with one of his colossal wings. “There’s definitely something special about the unmarked. Faust was right about that aura, too, tiny, but there.”

“Tiny for now,” Livian said. “Faust also said it doesn’t stay so tiny. You had every soul and demon nearby in the Spire blind with arousal at certain points, according to him.”

Oh no, not this again. She squirmed a little, but pushed down the reflex to blush and look down. Maintain eye contact.

“I don’t know what to tell you,” Mia said, “especially if telling you stuff means you’re just going to kill me.”

Romakus tapped his shoulders and forehead, in the classic Catholic gesture of the cross. What the fuck.

“I swear I won’t.”

“I don’t believe you.”

The following grin was utterly evil.

“Smart.”

“Either way,” Livian said, gesturing around at the demons that watched, “you’re not going anywhere until we learn what’s happening. And who knows, maybe we’ll be your allies?”

Mia scrunched up her nose. She didn’t believe that, either, and neither did they.

“What made the crack in Hell?” Romakus asked. “What is that strange, dark... thing, waiting at the bottom of it? Who killed Zel? What happened to the rider? And who was the woman in the aera armor?”

“You know about all that?” Mia asked. “I thought information took a long time to get around in Hell?”

“It does,” he said. “But the Damall have eyes everywhere, eyes with wings.” And of course he used a fancy flourish of a wing to point at the nearby bat girls. Unlike gargoyles, their wings were their arms, they were only as tall as a human, and they were quite skinny. They could probably glide pretty far, maybe even across the canyon.

Mia folded her arms across her chest.

“You’ll have to convince me I should tell you stuff.” Please no torture please no torture.

“Saving your life wasn’t enough?” Romakus asked.

“No, because you didn’t do that to save my life. You did that because you saw an opportunity to gain a new tool.”

“True. What would it take to convince you?”

Much as the big scary gorujin tetrad with his huge wings and big demon grin was unsettling, he did seem smart, capable of talking, even capable of planning, like Zel had been. Most demons were not like them. That meant communication and reasoning were on the table, if she was careful about it.

“Vinicius, healed. I need him.”

Romakus tilted his head. “What do you need him for?”

“To keep me alive.”

“As good a reason as any,” Livian said. “But it seemed like you were travelling toward a specific place. Wanna tell us where, at least?”

She could tell them that, at least. It was harmless information. Hopefully.

“The Black Valley.”

“Don’t want to stick around in Death’s Grip?”

“No.”

Chuckling, the two tetrads shrugged and nodded.

“Alright,” Romakus said. “Good enough for now. Twilight comes. These caves have a lot of tunnels and alcoves. Lots of places you and your pet can rest and recover.”

“He’s not my pet.”

The two demons laughed.

“Yosepha and Galon will come back eventually,” Romakus said. “Maybe they’ll convince you to tell us more.”

“Maybe.”

Livian laughed louder and backhanded Romakus in the shoulder. “You just want Yosepha’s ass again.”

Shrugging, Romakus gestured down the tunnel they’d come from, and the two tetrads began the trek back to Vinicius. Mia followed behind, making a quick glance back at the other demons to make sure they didn’t try to kill her or anything. Nope, they were curious about her, but didn’t follow, content to resume chatting to themselves. About her.

Wait. She blinked at Romakus’s back and wings, a half dozen times. Yosepha’s ass... again?

“It is the best ass in all of Hell,” he said.

Livian looked over her shoulder down at her own ass, which was, admittedly, a very firm, perfect ass, before she grinned back at her fellow demon.

“Really feel different than any other ass?”

“Oh it does,” he said. “Maybe it’s the way she tries to get away while we fuck, especially when she cums. The way her insides feel as she twists and turns and fights me, you have no idea.”

Oh god. Mia covered her face with her palms.

“I was there last time, remember?” Livian said. “I saw it up close.”

Oh god oh god.

“True. Maybe next time she’ll let you eat her out? You almost convinced her.”

Oh god oh god oh god.

“Maybe. I could...” Livian slowly turned back, and grinned down at Mia. “Oh, there it is. I can feel it, tingling right up the hooves straight into my pussy. That is a devious aura, unmarked. I can’t fight it. It’s just... there.”

“I... I...”

Romakus made one of those rumbling purrs Kas used to make when he came. Whether he meant to or not, the memory sent a warm wave through Mia, and she buried her face in her hands harder as the fingers in her soul plucked the strings nice and loud.

“Amazing,” Romakus said, turning and literally walking backward. “Your sex drive is on a hair trigger, little girl.”

“I’m not a little girl. I’m...”

“A woman,” Livian said, licking her fangs. “A small woman with a great little body. I bet at least one demon had a piece of that, knowing Zel.”

No point in lying about it. Her aura came out of her like an animal she’d been starving for days, and maybe that’s exactly what had happened. She hadn’t cum in so long, and something about her afterlife body just couldn’t handle that kind of deprivation.

“She... She had two bodyguards for me, a sarkarin and a vratorin. They... We had sex.” Okay, she didn’t have to lie, but she didn’t have to talk about it, either. Why talk about it? Was this really better than just stewing in her silent embarrassment?

“Oh my,” Livian said, and she slowed down until she walked next to Mia. “You must have enjoyed that.”

“That isn’t—” She snapped her eyes behind her and glared at some demons that’d started following them. They had playful little smiles. “That’s personal.”

“This is Hell, unmarked. There’s no personal. No private.”

“So I’m hearing! I don’t think that angel would appreciate you talking about her like that.”

Romakus laughed. Still walking backward, his ability to navigate the path and the remnants of the tunnel would have been fun and impressive, but the licking of his big fangs put a chill through Mia. Part of her liked the chill. Part of her was very much afraid of it. Romakus was unpredictable.

“She is right,” Livian said. “Yosepha is going to kill you some day.”

“Nah, she loves me.” He shrugged and turned around. “I’ll make sure the next time I tap that angel ass, you’re there to see it, Mia. Maybe you’ll join us? I bet even Yosepha would have a hard time ignoring that aura.”

Mia closed her eyes and looked for the fingers inside her. Stop plucking strings, god damn it. Stop filling the whole tunnel up with sexual desire.

“You know what Julisa is going to do,” Livian said. “The moment Vinicius isn’t bleeding all over the place, she’s going to do everything she can to convince him to fuck her. Or just top him while he’s injured.”

Romakus flourished his tail with a wave.

“I have less to worry from Yosepha than she has to from Vinicius.”

“True. I bet she’ll ask Mia to help her out, then.” Livian leaned forward as she walked, two lower hands on her legs, higher two on her hips, as she looked at Mia. “Or maybe I should just take the leash? I wonder if Vinicius would be happier with someone else having it?”

Mia clutched the necklace and glared at the Zel look-alike.

“Vinicius might be bound by the leash,” Mia said, “but he resisted Zel for centuries, leash included. He’s helping me by his own choice.”

The two tetrads shared glances. They didn’t believe her. Well, she was right, and they were going to learn that eventually when Vin didn’t screw Mia over by asking the Damall to take her leash. Hopefully.

Ugh, she was screwed. After using the leash on him to stop him from killing the angels, three angels who’d nearly killed him, and had seriously injured him? Screwed. Completely screwed.

Please, Vin, please. Don’t fuck her over. Don’t get her killed. Don’t let the world end.

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~~David~~

So far, so good. The two impas and two gremlas hadn’t led them into any ambushes, despite taking them past perfect locations to do so. They’d even found some more imps and grems, a dozen of them, a mix of male and females hiding out in some alcoves with entrances too small for anyone larger than David to get through. But the little demons had no trouble, and more than a few of them came out, spoke to La, La, La, and La, about what was up in the tunnels.

They didn't follow, though. David even suggested it, but the other imps and grems had no interest in fighting Cainites, or maybe just thought David and his crew wouldn't be able to. Considering how torn up David's crew were, he didn't blame them. But the Las, apparently the more adventurous of the bunch, marched on, and Caera and the crew followed.

Or at least, tried to follow. David hissed and yanked a foot away from another bit of bloodgrip, and Acelina mirrored it as she jerked her shoulder away from some vine dangling from the low ceiling.

"Doing okay back there?" he asked in a whisper.

"No."

He looked back and raised a brow. Much as Acelina was the haughty, queenly type, she was also perfectly happy to bitch and complain when something bothered her. Not always a good thing, but it was better than someone who never complained, and then over kilometers of walking, the grain of sand in their shoe wore a hole straight through their heel flesh. But with her, she complained about everything. So, maybe less a haughty queen, and more a spoiled princess.

Daoka clicked a few times as she reached down and lifted one of Acelina's wings over a patch of bloodgrip. Acelina clicked back. Could a click sound be annoyed but grateful? It kinda did.

"How much longer," Caera asked, "before we're past this tunnel?"

"Not long," Lasca said. It'd taken a while, but David managed to pick Lasca out of the group easily now. She was a tad taller than the other impa, and had a few scars. Given how imps and grems worked, she probably became the leader because of her size.

He almost asked how long was not long, but stopped himself. There'd be no point. Imps and grems didn't think much beyond five minutes, so Jes had drilled into his head, and Caera and the others never asked them much except 'which way'. Their guides were goldfish.

But, with time, the tunnel opened up, and they all sighed relief as bloodgrip stopped cutting their ankles every ten minutes.

That was, of course, when the tunnel took a hard turn, and the group of them walked into a dozen Cainites. Hidden in the dark, the men and women sprang up out of cracks in the ground, grooves in the walls, from behind boulders, and one fell from a rock in the ceiling.

David froze. Twelve souls, dressed in the same sort of gear David was, but more of it, some metal bits strapped to shoulders and legs and forearms and chests. They had meera weapons, too, but from the few weapons David could completely see, they didn't have any red veins.

Not true. One of them did. A sword.

Chaos erupted. The imps and grems shrieked and jumped up onto the walls, out of the way. Caera roared. Jes snarled. Dao hopped in right behind her. Acelina unleashed an aura of violence that almost bowled David over, and she let out a banshee scream before charging into the madness. No hesitation. No delay.

What happened? How'd they get ambushed? The imps and grems betrayed them? No, the little demons had thrown themselves back into the fray, and Lasca had already jumped one of the Cainites' backs and was ripping their throat open. In just seconds, blood was everywhere, and guts followed.

Guts?

David took a small step back and forced down the urge to wretch. The humans were covered in guts, and skin, and everything between. They'd been covered in it before the fight had even begun.

The only thing that kept him from reeling back, was the heat surging through his veins as Acelina drowned them in her aura. If the others were using their sin auras, he couldn't tell. It was a wall of blinding sensation, waves that smashed against the stones and drowned him, boiling in his limbs that demanded he pick up a something, anything, and join the fight.

He picked up a rock, took a step toward the fight, and took a breath. The aura. Acelina's aura. Zotivas created ludicrously powerful auras according to the girls, and the heat surging through him told him to abandon all sense of self preservation and just throw himself into the middle of the fight. Don't worry about living, just kill, kill, kill. But he took another breath, and stopped.

The part of him inside that plucked the strings, the strange part of himself that hadn't been there when he'd been alive, it pulsed, not drowned by the aura, not buried by it, and David latched onto it. A barrier. It came with no rune, no symbol, no way for him to wrap his mind around it and understand it logically, it was just something in him that was there. It let him block the aura drowning everyone else, and he clenched his eyes shut for a tenth of a second as he re-summoned his thoughts.

Instead of running into the fight, he threw his rock at one of the Cainites, the closest one. They were swinging a big axe at Acelina, and the huge demon was having trouble avoiding it; big as the tunnel had grown, it wasn't big enough for her to maneuver easily. The rock hit the man in the side hard, and they turned and faced David with enough rage and bloodlust in their eyes, it struck David still.

They wore intestines around their throat, like a necklace.

Acelina took advantage and got the Cainite in the side of the face with the entire set of her right hand's claws. The man went down, dropped their axe, and screamed, clutching their face as they fell to

their knees. But Acelina didn't finish him. With a snake-like hiss, she turned back toward the chaos, and joined the others in the fight once more.

David grabbed another rock, let a little bit of Acelina's aura in, and threw the rock down on the Cainite's skull. He could feel horrible about it later. For now, the aura wiped away guilt, worry, doubt, all of that, and a single drop of it was more than enough.

He picked up the axe. It took two hands, and just getting it up onto his shoulder was difficult. Cainites had to be supernaturally stronger than humans, considering the man he'd just mercy killed didn't look to be all that much bigger than David. But the aura ripped the puzzle from his thoughts and tossed it aside. That didn't matter. Just use it, and kill.

The Cainites didn't know who they were messing with. The imps and grems, sure, they had to work together to deal with just one soul at a time, especially since the Cainites were apparently superhuman. But Jes and Caera weren't just run-of-the-mill demons. They had a lot of experience under their belt, a lot of battles, a lot of kills, and the two of them diced through the human souls in a brutal dance of dismemberment.

The tunnel filled with the sounds of falling weapons clinking on the rocks, and gargled yells and screams full of blood. Demons went for the throat.

One of the Cainites got past Daoka, and while she head-butted another soul, the woman with a sword swung for her back. But Acelina was there already, charging in, ignoring the bloodgrip that dangled from the ceiling even as it ripped her wings. She got her hands on the Cainite from behind and tore off their head.

The Cainites didn't respond. They didn't care. The aura drowned all thought, buried all sense of strategic thinking, and had everyone throwing themselves at whatever was in front of them. Acelina was not immune to her own aura. Both she and Daoka didn't stop, didn't react to the fact a headless corpse had just fallen underneath their hooves, they just kept moving.

David followed, stepping over the bodies. So close to Acelina, it was like walking straight into the crashing waves of an ocean in a storm. The aura poured out of her in pulses, and each one earned a new roar or growl from the demons. Even the imps and grems, who resisted auras according to the girls, were lost to it.

Sure enough, Daoka jumped ahead, Acelina followed, and one of the Cainites someone else had knocked to the side got back up. The demons didn't notice or care, and left their backs exposed. That was why David followed behind, axe on his shoulder.

The Cainite went for Acelina's back; well, her ass, considering how tall she was. David was only five feet behind, but the Cainite didn't so much as look his way. She had a bigger target.

David brought the axe down on the woman's shoulder. The feedback struck him still. Flesh and bone parted under the weighty blade, the woman's shoulder opening under the heavy impact of the ridiculous axe, and David's feet came up off the ground an inch with his swing. Metal, splitting muscle, and splattering blood. Metal, going through someone's body.

He wished he had a gun. There was a healthy — or not so healthy — disconnect from violence when you used a gun. But an axe left an imprint, from his skin up to his brain, the way the grip vibrated in his palms when it hit the skin, then muscle, then bone. It was a mercy the axe went deep, carried by its mass, and killed the woman almost instantly.

Acelina and Daoka, and now Jeskura pushed forward, and David followed behind. Another Cainite went for them, and again, David got them in the back, this time from the side where there were no bits of armor or leather straps. They didn't die, though, and the weight of the axe meant David couldn't yank it back quickly. They turned, grabbed the shaft of the axe, and glared at David.

The eyes were exactly what he expected from a crazy psycho human wearing entrails over-top their bits of armor. Them not dying from the axe that sank several inches into their side, he did not expect. They snarled, and with one hand still holding the axe, swung their sword down at David. And all the girls were facing the other direction.

David held out a hand. In a quarter second, he was going to get the sword straight down through the hand, and with how heavy the weapons were, it was going to split his arm in half, down to the elbow. But he held out his hand anyway, because what the fuck else was he supposed to do.

In that quarter second, while a crazy soul high on demon hearts and sin auras came at him, something clicked. He almost heard it. Click. Things, snapping together. Pure reflex. Didn't think, didn't analyze, just did.

His hand flashed gold. Something went 'dink' in the obvious way metal did when hitting other metal. Impact sent his arm swinging back, and the man with the sword stumbled back, too.

The gold disappeared as quickly as it'd appeared, and David, now on his ass on the bloody stones, stared up at the equally shocked Cainite.

Acelina turned around and raked her claws down the Cainite's back. The life drained from their eyes, and they fell.

No questions came from the spire mother. The demon and her obsidian, featureless face opened its wide mouth full of shark teeth, but not in a knowing grin or surprised awe. Still drowning in the aura she herself created, Acelina reached down, yanked the axe free of her latest victim, and looked at David for a second longer than was probably good. But, instead of chopping him down with her new weapon, she turned back to the others, and chopped down another Cainite instead, one that was about to kill one of the gremlas.

And that was the last of them. The barely saved gremla jumped for joy, literally, and pounced on the Cainite Acelina had cut open. The last few seconds the Cainite spent alive, he spent knowing what it felt like to have claws tear open his chest, and the happy high-pitched chirps of a demon only four feet tall.

Acelina let out a long, harsh hiss, and the aura faded away. Caera, Jes, and Dao finally turned around, as if the invisible lure pulling them further into the tunnel had blinked out of existence. Muscles relaxed, panting and growling quietened until inaudible, and soon the only noise was the two impas and two gremlas tearing up bodies. They were hungry.

“Holy shit,” David said, pushing himself back up to his feet. “First time in a while I didn’t get hurt in a fight.”

Daoka hopped back to him and hugged him, straight on, and he almost fell over. But she kept her grip tight around him and chirped into his ear as she squeezed hard enough his lungs stopped working. He had to pat her back a few times to get her to stop, and she rubbed her horns against his head and hair as she chirped some more.

“I said I’m fine.” Smiling, he rubbed his forehead into Dao’s. “How’s everyone else?”

With a single click, Dao stepped back and looked to Acelina, and Acelina stepped to the side enough for Jes and Caera to come back to him.

Jes looked like shit. Dao and Jes wore a decent amount of armor, but there’d been so many Cainites, the gargoyle had been stabbed in the side. A hand over the wound was the best they had for now, and Jes grumbled as she glared down at her claws leaking blood down her side and leg. If her eyes could affect things, her furious glare would have burned the wound closed.

Dao hopped back over to her lover, hugged her, and the two shared a kiss. In Hell, being surrounded by corpses and guts wasn’t enough to stop a romantic moment.

“I watched Acelina’s back, I know she’s fine,” David said. “Caera?”

Caera grumbled as she sat cat-like in front of him, but it didn't last, and she lifted an arm. A nasty gash ran down her shoulder, and it was not shallow. Unfortunately for the big tiger lady, she didn't have as much armor as the satyr or gargoyle, and once David got close, a few more gashes made themselves known.

"Christ," he said.

"I killed four of them," Caera said. "Injuries are worth it."

Jes gestured up at the giant lady standing beside them.

"You might not have gotten injured if Acelina hadn't hit us with that aura. Hard to fight smart with her sin skull-fucking us."

"Nonsense," Acelina said. "My aura kept the Cainites from exploiting their positions. They did ambush us, unless that escaped your notice."

"Oh fuck off. You stayed in the back. The rest of us got swarmed."

Caera shook her head. "Acelina is right, Jes. We got ambushed. The aura made it into a brawl, instead. Be happy."

Jes squirmed a little, still clutching her gut, and looked back up at Acelina. For a second, it almost looked like she was going to say something crazy, like 'thank you', but that did seem to be outside her skill repertoire, so she grumbled and moved down the tunnel a little ways. Dao clicked twice up at Acelina, smiling, and hopped after her lover.

David put up a hand. "Las? How are you girls doing? You..." No point in asking. They were all quite enraptured with getting food, and they weren't big enough to just rip the bodies apart. Opening a corpse's chest up wasn't easy for a little demon. "The Cainites managed an ambush. How? I thought you could smell humans, especially when it's so many of them?"

"I can, normally." Caera gestured down at one nearby body, and the guts wrapped around their neck. "They're wearing remnant flesh."

"Remnant..." He took a small step back. Remnant flesh didn't last long after death. A day, sometimes less. "That's kind of smart, but also, kind of... specific. I mean, what possible reason could they have to do that other than for hunting demons?"

"That's what they were doing," Caera said after a wince and weight shift. "They were strong, too. They've eaten demon recently, and frequently, to be this strong."

"Do Cainites normally do stuff like this?"

“No,” Caera said. “This is... pretty organized. They’ve probably been waiting here for hours, all for the chance a demon might just stumble on them.”

Acelina hissed as she took a step toward David.

“Enough about the souls. They are dead. I want to know what that gold light was, unmarked.”

“The gold light?”

“Yes, the gold light!” She came closer, growling and baring her fangs. “Earlier today, angels tried to kill us, and used a beam of gold light to do it. And now, you summoned a light of the same color. I did not see what you did, only that a Cainite had attacked you, and yet you sat there, unharmed.”

David gulped, and looked past Acelina to Caera, but the tiger lady only tilted her head as she raised an eyebrow.

“I... don’t know what it was,” he said.

“You do not know?” the spire mother asked. “You did something! Speak!”

“I’m speaking I’m speaking! I’m telling you, I brought up my hand, and...” And the batlam rune flashed in his mind. “And it was like... I dunno, a reflex? Like, you know, when you jerk your hand up or head away because you see movement in the corner of your eye?”

The demons looked between each other, and the three with noses and lips frowned.

Daoka clicked a few times and gestured to Acelina.

“I was between him and the rest of you,” Acelina said. “My wings blocked most of the light, and my indomitable aura left your weak minds too distracted to notice.”

Of course, her words got her a few snarls, but when they looked David’s way, all he could do was shrug.

“She is right,” he said. “I... did something. I snapped up my hand, gold light came out of it, and I blocked that Cainite’s weapon. Even felt it. Felt like... metal hitting metal.”

Acelina grumbled. Daoka clicked a few more times. Caera sighed. Jes, further down the tunnel, snorted and scooped up one sword in particular. Even at a distance, the glowing amber along its black surface was beautiful, and looked all too similar to the amber veins that ran along the tunnel walls. Or at least, it did, but even as Jes held it and walked back toward them, the veins pulsed a few times, and faded away.

“Well, shit,” she said, and she tossed it to the ground. The once empowered sword bounced around on the gory floor before stopping at David’s feet. “That coulda been useful.”

David reached down, grabbed the hilt, and braced for... something, anything, to happen. It might explode. It might flash some new rune. It might—

He sucked in a breath and reeled back, but didn’t let go. The sword dragged with him, and its weight stopped him from landing on his ass. Holy shit, it was flashing a rune. Every muscle in his body locked, lungs froze, and the world went silent as the sword hit him with the same electric sensation he’d felt when touching his sister.

One of the runes she’d planted in his mind flared behind his eyes. But before he could do something with it, it died away, and the electricity stopped.

The sword did not awaken.

Muscles working again, he grunted and groaned, and lifted the damn thing until he got it upright, tip to the ground and hilt up and in palm. It wasn’t all that big a sword, not much bigger than the typical one-handed sword a human wielded, with grip just barely big enough for two hands. But it weighed almost as much as the axe.

“You looked like you were about to do something,” Jes said. “Like with Caera’s seal.”

“Y-Yeah, same thing I guess. The sword has been infused with a rune. And... I can... kinda see it, kinda understand it, like Caera’s seal.”

Acelina hissed, picked up the sword, and rotated it in front of her.

“Here,” she said, tapping a claw on the hilt, before she tossed him the sword again. Literally. David dodged aside, let the meera blade bounce around on the ground, glared at the huge demon for a few seconds, and again picked up the heavy thing.

“Oh hey, yeah, there it is.” A tiny rune carved into the hilt. He touched it again, but nothing happened.

“What’s it mean?” Caera asked. “You read mine.”

“It means... Fuck, I don’t know. There’s something about... destruction. It’s similar to the symbol for hellfire. But, different?”

They all stared at him. They did not look impressed.

“Oh come on. I’m trying to learn a language that doesn’t make any sense.”

Caera gestured to the sword. “And the ancient language has nothing to do with it?”

“They’re similar, but not in any way I can use. But...” He let the sword go, and it clanked uselessly. “Ugh, something has to click before I go insane. It’s right on the tip of my tongue, or whatever.”

With a quiet snarl, Caera gestured down at the weapon.

“If the hellfire-infused sword stops working after the wielder dies, and the wielder was just a regular soul...” She walked off, and came back with a corpse. And with a little more brutality than was required, she checked the body for—yeap, a rune, right on the palm.

Daoka clicked, grabbed the sword, and put it in the corpse’s hand. No response.

With a harsh snarl, Caera slashed down at the man’s chest, hard enough the body half flew to the side and got stuck in some bloodgrip. She’d cut the corpse hard enough to get through the leather straps holding its breastplate on, and she didn’t waste time following it up with another swipe, and another, to get through the chest and sternum.

“Caera—”

She reached into the chest, yanked out the heart with a jerk that splashed everyone nearby, David included, and tossed the organ to him. Again, literally. But a heart he could catch, and it landed in his palms against his chest.

“Eat. Maybe it’ll help, if this person is marked.” She gave him a nod, a do-it-now glare, turned, and joined the imps and grems getting food. Jes turned, did the same, and Acelina and Daoka eventually followed.

David found a patch of ground not covered in vines or blood — he had to go back a ways to do that — and sat down. A human heart sat in his palms, again, and he waited for it to spring to life, beat, leap from his hand, do all the stuff a heart organ from a nightmare would do. It did none of that. It sat there, warm, wet, waiting to be eaten.

He took a bite. Caera was right on the money. First, the memories of the soul, some bastard who’d abused animals to set up those fake ‘look at me save this random animal’ viral videos. A lot of animals. But once that horrible shit ran through his consciousness and found a slot in the growing library of memories that didn’t belong to him, safely out of the way where he didn’t have to think about them, something else followed.

A rune. The same rune. It flared in his mind again, and this time, something else came with it. Affect? No, affect didn't fit right. Bind? Attach? Infuse? Infuse made sense. A rune circling a rune circling a rune, swirling around each other like strands of DNA.

And it made sense. It actually kinda made sense, fucking finally, and his hand squeezed the air as it looked for the tool it wanted to use to craft the rune. One hand for the implement. One hand for the power source. A center point, a catalyst between, a structure, to create the foundation of the change.

Daoka joined him. Squatting in front of him, she chirped a few times, and gently shook his shoulder.

"I'm alright," he said. "Better than alright, I think." The heart waited in his hand, half eaten. He'd taken more bites than he realized, and the heart and its delicious warmth invited him to indulge. He did not. "Want the other half? I'm full. And I want to know if you see anything, like I did."

She tilted her head, looking at him with her eyeless gaze, but he smiled back at her, and eventually she took the heart and ate it.

"Anything?"

Shaking her head, she sat down beside him, and made a few more happy chirps as she finished the heart.

"I saw some things," he said. "Something, or someone, branded that Cainite, and the weapon, too."

Daoka clicked a few times, shrugged, and gestured down the tunnel. They'd probably find out sooner or later, following the path they were on. Caera's warpath.

"Yeah, you're right." His eyes ran down Dao's leg, and the micro cuts on her calves and shins. "It'll be twilight soon, right?"

A click for yes.

"Think we'll find a spot to rest?"

Another click.

"Good."

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They found something pretty rare, and something all the demons, even Acelina, were excited to find. An alcove in the ceiling. Cainites couldn't reach it, and the demons had to work together to get claws on the entrance's lips. Only Acelina could reach it without help, and even then, just barely. But it was easy enough for Acelina to help Jes and Dao up into the five-foot-wide hole, and then for them to help everyone else up.

Everyone else included the impas and gremlas, too. They squeaked and cheered, waving their arms around as they waited beneath them for their turn.

“We pulling them up?” David asked. “I think we should. They've been good to their word, and useful in a fight.”

“Of course you think we should,” Caera said, rolling her eyes. But she didn't argue. She half lowered herself down the hole, tail first, careful of her bleeding arm, and the little demons came up over her shoulder a second later. All those back spikes made for easy climbing.

“Yay!”

“Yay!”

“Not hungry anymore!”

“Full! Food! Wanton violence!”

Wanton violence? What the fuck?

The four Las jumped around in a circle, before settling down beside the hole and looking around the alcove. Not the biggest cave, but big enough for the five of them to sit comfortably, imps and grems included. So, nine of them. Plus, it had enough amber veins they could see without issue, and it didn't have any remnants or bloodgrip. A perfect place to stop for the night.

Acelina sat in her usual feminine way, and immediately tended to her wings. Jes sat opposite of her. David sat between them, and Daoka sat between him and Jes. There was room for Caera to come sit, too, but she lay by the hole in a defensive position, and waited. The four little demons looked at Caera, the joy drained from their eyes, and they very carefully — and exaggeratedly — tiptoed around her, before coming over to the group.

“We stay?” Lasca asked.

David looked past her to Caera, but the tiger said nothing. Classic obsession mode. Anything and everything would be a distraction to her until she met her goal.

Jeskura shrugged. “Yeah sure. But try and eat our pet and we'll rip out your guts. Understand?”

The four Las cheered, again, and all four ran up to David and sat down by his feet. With the way the cave was shaped, by his feet also meant sitting by Jes's talons, and Dao and Acelina's hooves.

"Pet human is smart!"

"Pet human is like humans in scrying pool!"

"Scrying pool human!"

"Scrying pool human!"

Oh boy. More TV addicts.