

~~Mia~~

Counter-clockwise, that was their direction. No North or South. She asked about a map, but Adron just laughed and shook his head. Maps were the tools of spire rulers and few else.

The more she listened to them, the more it became obvious the demons weren't... smart. In tune with their environment and perfectly comfortable with it, sure. Capable of navigating kilometers upon kilometers of harsh mountain terrain through skill and memory, sure. Capable of hunting with their bare hands, sure. Capable of defending themselves against creatures even bigger and stronger than them, sure.

Capable of thinking about the future? Apparently not. Demons, the ones she'd seen anyway, lived in the moment and didn't care about much else. Caera cared about other stuff, but even then, book smart, demons were not.

Maybe Zel would be different?

Diogo took lead. Strong, massive, tough, and probably just as dumb as the rest of the demons, he marched ahead. The type of prideful man — demon — who'd have taken point even if he was smaller and weaker, and would have promptly died first for his stupidity. But sometimes, dumb people — demons — were really big and strong and got away with stupid shit because of it. Natural selection was a bitch. But at least Diogo wasn't a coward. There was a strange power in that, and why the other demons followed him without hesitation. Fear, and respect.

The other two brutes, naked, followed beside him, left and right, like henchmen. Behind them, the two tiger ladies, walking on all fours with their huge tails swaying behind them. Between the two tiger ladies, walked the succubus and incubus, and Mia and Hannah, and the two men she didn't know the names of yet. Behind them, Adron, the other vrat, and the gargoyle walked, rear scouts.

Surrounded. Protecting her from the dangers of Hell, according to Diogo, but it also meant there was no way she'd get to run away while everyone was awake. And naked as she was, it wasn't like she could pick up a sharp object and not have them notice. There were sharp objects around though, big stone chunks that'd broken off the tall rocks and mountains. Bones too, most ground into powder but plenty more broken, with sharp tips. A femur bone would be perfect, if she was lucky enough to stab one of the demons in the eye. The rock would be the safer bet for penetrating skin at the soft spots like the throat. But she couldn't risk grabbing any of them.

She glanced over at the two men with 666 on their foreheads. Big and strong, handsome too, with muscles and abs. One blond, the other a black man with short hair. But as attractive as they were, they were nothing compared to the incubus walking ahead of them. The dark red skin, two small horns, and long skinny devil tail didn't detract from how hot he was; if anything they added into the exoticness. Unlike the humans, the succubus and incubus wore some simple loin cloths of the dark red leathery material that apparently all demons harvested somehow. The succubus also used some of the material to create an X strap across her chest to hold her ridiculous breasts in check.

Every moment near the two sex demons, Mia could feel their aura, invisible but there and something her ghost brain understood innately. Just another thing on the list of strange shit Hell had. She felt auras from the other demons too, quiet ones that didn't have any particular, specific sensation to them. A little lust, a bit more violence, but it was all background noise in her mind. The two sex demons' auras were stronger, and aligned on one very specific, obvious thing.

And they both kept glancing Mia's way. Not Hannah's, or the two men's. They were looking at her. They looked hungry, licking their lips and small fangs as they looked her up and down. Fuck, they were so pretty.

She needed a distraction. Hell was a good one. The burning sky. The distant, colossal mountains. The spire tower in the distance. In particular, the occasional metal pillar with its brazier skull top were strangely beautiful, and the burning bushes left her pondering. She'd never read the bible, but who the fuck didn't know the story of Moses?

But, after a few hours of brisk walking, she could only admire the crazy landscape so much. She needed a better distraction.

"So, Hannah," she said. "How long have you known Adron?"

Hannah rolled her eyes. "You mean how long have I been a betrayer?"

"I... guess. Just trying to make conversation." She gestured to Diogo, the two other brutes, and the two tiger ladies. They were chatting, quietly and infrequently, but still chatting, using a lot of words she didn't know: Gazra Crag, Tacitus, Thorn Mountain, Geeraz Tombs, stuff like that. Far as she could tell, they were people and places, and the more she heard, the more complicated Hell sounded. And big.

Hannah sighed, but shrugged eventually. "Fine. Just, quietly. Last thing we want is for a pack of hellhounds to find us."

"Hellhounds?"

"Think wolves. Big, hungry wolves. Breathe fire."

“Jesus.”

Hannah laughed, quietly. “No Jesus is going to help us. So be careful.”

Nodding, Mia stepped in closer to her fellow naked woman. “So, how long?”

“I became Adron’s betrayer... must have been five years ago. Maybe more.”

“Five years. That a long life?”

“For a betrayer, decently long. For a normal soul, it’s unheard of.” Hannah glanced back at Adron, who grinned at her from twenty feet away. A spark of amusement, annoyance, attraction, and even fondness crossed her face, but she was quick to squash it.

“You two seem to be pretty sexually compatible,” Mia said.

That earned a squint from the betrayer.

“What’re you getting at, unmarked?”

“Nothing! Nothing. Just, this morning, you looked... It looked...”

“Demons know how to fuck. That what you’re getting at?”

Mia gulped. “I mean, yes, but I didn’t expect that. I didn’t expect Hell at all, but I didn’t picture the demons being, uh, talented lovers.”

“With giant cocks.”

Gulp turned into cough.

“That, too.”

“Much as I can’t stand that bastard,” Hannah lied, “Adron knows how to fuck. So does every demon, really. Not every demon is nice enough to give a shit about the person they’re fucking, though.”

“Do demons... need to do that kind of stuff?”

“Rape and torture?”

Wincing, Mia took a deep breath.

“Yeah, that.”

“No, they don’t need to do it. Plenty of them don’t. Plenty of them do. Can’t say I blame them. Growing up in a place like this, where your prey falls from the sky, runs and hides, and begs for their lives but you have to kill them anyway? And then you’re surrounded by fucking remnants every day and night? I’d grow up fucked up, too.”

But she was fucked up, a bad person in some way. She was in Hell, and she wasn't here by accident. Mia had to be careful.

That wasn't exactly fair, was it? Just because Hannah was in Hell didn't mean she was doomed to forever be a horrible person. Right? That'd really suck, if souls were sent to Hell to suffer, but were incapable of repentance, or changing and becoming better people. Too late, but still.

"I'll try and remember that, then. Caera seemed nice."

"She is, usually."

"And, um, Adron, he seems... charming?"

Hannah coughed on a chuckle. "Just ask."

"Just ask?"

"Just ask. You saw it up close. How did I fit that fucker inside me?"

Mia was going to have to get used to how blunt everyone was, she knew that, but she hadn't expected it from another human. Hannah sounded even more direct than Adron.

"It was... pretty shocking."

"Yeah well, these afterlife bodies are more durable than their living counterparts. A bit, anyway. Plus Adron's been fucking me for years. You get used to it."

"Used to it? I dunno—"

"Trust me, your body will adapt. Mostly. Still feels like I'm getting my guts rearranged."

"In... In a good way, right?"

Hannah grinned at her. "Usually, yeah. Pisses me the fuck off, but you saw, no point in me lying about it. The sex is good. The sex is really fucking good. If Zel doesn't just eat you, she might keep you as a pet or something, so you'll probably have to get used to taking a couple dicks, bigger than Adron's."

"W-What?" Oh no.

Hannah gave her a gentle pat on the shoulder.

"Zel's got a couple of close guards she keeps with her all the time, far as I know. And far as I know, she likes to share things with them. Everything."

Shivering, Mia rubbed her arms as she looked down. Okay, that was bad, very bad. But it was Hell, and she was just going to have to get used to it.

No. Fuck that. She was going to escape. She was going to escape and kill any demon that got in her way.

Then again... She peeked at Hannah a bit, and looked the naked woman up and down. Hannah walked with a strange pride Mia had been struggling to put her finger on before, but now, it clicked. Hannah was oddly happy. There was definitely some conflict going on in her noggin', but she found some way to be satisfied in Hell. She enjoyed great sex with an attractive demon and his massive penis regularly. Maybe that could be Mia?

How quickly someone questions their plan when shit gets difficult. She frowned as she looked down and watched her toes press against the stones. She didn't want to die, again. She wanted to live. She wanted to escape and find David, but how the fuck would that work? Just, run off into to the mountains and die thirty minutes later to a hungry demon, or apparently a hellhound or whatever? It was stupid. She had to come up with a better plan.

She glanced at Hannah again, memory conjuring up images of the blond girl sitting on Adron's enormous length, as the handsome creature choked her and played with her clitoris. That would have made Mia cum her brains out in minutes. And then there was the other girl she saw getting DP'd by two vrats, and Mia knew that would have turned her into a giant puddle, too. Just the idea of those brute demons, even bigger than the vrats, holding her and both trying to fit enormous girths into her small body, had her skin tingling again. Would it be so bad to give in and be part of that?

Yes! Yes, it would be bad! Holy shit this place was getting to her. The place, and the nearby incubus and succubus drowning her in their auras.

The plan only needed a slight tweak. Still escape, but don't get herself killed in the process. She was no good to David dead.

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“Holy shit,” she said, wiping sweat from her forehead. “How the fuck do people get around in this place?”

Adron laughed as he stood high on one of the big rocks. The path hadn't been too bad, a mostly straight, flat path that wended between the hills. It occasionally cut up through the mountains, not too high but damn well high enough it left Mia winded. And she was in good shape! But Hell didn't care. This wasn't a stroll along a mountain path. This was a proper hike, and the only reason she wasn't on her knees, exhausted, was the lack of a backpack full of camping equipment.

“Wimp,” Adron said, grinning down at her.

She growled up at him, but that only made him laugh more. It was one of those damn tasty laughs that made him endearing, but also made her want to punch him in his stupid grin. No wonder Hannah liked him, and was frustrated by him.

Hannah and the two men were winded too, thankfully. It'd have been a pretty big blow to Mia's pride otherwise, or more importantly, terrifying to think she was the straggler, and they might punish her for it. But thankfully the demons expected the humans to slow them down. Why though? Why take them, Hannah and the two men? For an emergency snack? Or, an emergency fuck?

The hill ran alongside them and connected to one of the huge mountains. Beside them, a ravine, at least a hundred feet drop down onto the red river, and the walls of the ravine were covered in nasty rocks. That explained why the path took them up, so it could slide near the river before getting around the mountain and back ground level.

“Don't let him fuck with you,” Hannah said. “Demons don't do well over long distances, either. They're stopping because if they keep going, they'll suddenly get tired, pretty hard, too.”

“Like... predators, on the surface. Lions and bears and whatnot. Sprinters, but not equipped for long distance?”

“Kinda. They're stopping before it kicks in.”

“Oh no,” Adron said, squatting on his rock, like a perching bird, “she knows our secret. Demons aren't good at cross country running.”

Hannah and Mia rolled their eyes. But after a few more seconds of panting, Mia strolled up to Adron's big rock, and looked past him. They still had a long way to go, but she could see the spire in the distance, especially now that they had some altitude. Too far to see the details of the spire, but not so far they couldn't see it.

It was so fucking tall, it touched the burning sky. It got skinnier on the way up, but if she was guessing right despite how far she was, it wasn't as skinny as she'd originally thought. It was thicker,

and taller, maybe a kilometer tall, had ten disc-like levels up its length, protrusions that stuck out horizontal from the tower and circled it. Landing platforms?

What the spire was made of, she couldn't tell yet. From this far, it looked like more dark rock like the rest of Hell, but it had a bunch of giant spikes that almost looked white. The fire sky colored everything, and the distance filled the air with shimmering haze, just like the heat in a sand desert would. But the spire stood tall and horrific, nestled between two tall mountains. She had a feeling the closer they got, the more ugly it'd become.

"Not sure why we don't send a flyer," Mia said, earning a confused glance from every demon. "Uh, like her?" She gestured toward the gargoyle. What, they didn't understand how wings worked?

Diogo, still at the head of the pack, snorted once, but said nothing. Annoyed with her, but not so annoyed he'd start yelling. He definitely radiated 'piss me off and I'll break you in half' vibes, but Mia was just a little too exhausted at the moment to pick her words more carefully.

"Demons can't fly," the gargoyle Loria said, shrugging as she pulled her tail around her, and flicked off a piece of rock stuck to its black, leathery skin. "Glide, but not fly."

"Oh." That, actually kinda made sense. "Even the little ones?"

"Even the pests." Loria shrugged, walked past her, and hopped up onto the rock with Adron. "Boss?"

Diogo gestured out to the path ahead. Like a giant eagle, or more like a giant bat, Loria spread her massive wings, and Mia stared at the enormous wingspan. But sure enough, once Loria jumped off the rock and took the air, the issue was obvious. Loria had big wings, but not big enough to deal with her weight. David would probably talk about square-cube law, or that birds had partially hollow bones and little total blood volume, blah blah. Why would Hell care about rules like that?

Ten minutes later, Loria returned on foot, and perched on the rock beside Adron again.

"Nothing, Diogo," she said.

"Then we move."

All four humans groaned. Even if demons didn't have the stamina to go hiking for hours and hours, their bodies didn't seem to get worn down by it, dark skin impervious to wear and tear. Last thing Mia wanted was to tear her feet up again, and even toughened up, knowing they still had a massive hike ahead of them had her terrified of cutting them. Her fellow humans watched the ground as they walked as much as she did, too.

The demons though, they walked the rough terrain as comfortably as any predator who lived in it. Not a single misplaced step, no wasted energy. They fell into a comfortable formation, brutes at the front again, humans and sex demons in the center, though Mia found herself drifting a little closer toward Adron as the hike resumed. One of the tiger ladies looked at her, strangely beautiful like Caera, but with a little more hunger in her black and red eyes than Mia was comfortable with. Not the good kind of hunger, either.

“It’s kinda surprising,” Mia said to no one. “I mean, the sky of fire makes sense. The river of red water... and blood, and bones. The remnants. But it’s still all... physical, you know?”

“Physical?”

Mia snapped her head to the side. The incubus spoke. Anyone with ears would have noticed the immediate singer’s voice, a pleasing baritone, deep enough to sound nice but not deep enough to make her teeth vibrate, unlike Diogo. The other incubus she’d seen back at the cave had a more beautiful, almost feminine look to him. This one was decidedly very masculine, but his gentle eyes sent tingles through her. Bedroom eyes, twenty-four-seven.

“Yeah, physical. A lot of the stuff I read about Hell suggested it’d be like... spiraling planes on top of planes. Unending lakes of fire. Just, things that are more... dream-like? Or nightmare-like, I guess.”

“Caera,” the incubus said, “says what records she’d found tell of a Hell similar to that.”

“Yeah?”

“Hundreds of thousands of years ago.”

“Hundreds of thousands? That’s... That’s a long time for any language to survive.” And longer than any human language existed.

“You’d have to ask Caera about that, but we find runes all the time, too old to read. They’re not Estian, or Hellian.” Shrugging, the incubus gestured out to the path between the mountains ahead of them, spread out enough that they could see hundreds of kilometers of land, and the spire standing between it all. “Zel might be able to answer your questions.”

Mia frowned as she looked at the gorgeous incubus, and then at the demons around them. They weren’t being quiet anymore, but then they were also much higher up now. Safe from ambushes or hellhounds up here, maybe.

“People keep saying Zel, but no one’s told me a thing about her. I’m picturing the Queen of England, on a throne, big white wig or something.”



It was the succubus's turn to speak, after a predictably sultry chuckle.

“There's a reason Diogo is going to see her in person, unmarked.”

“I figured that was because you're demons, and you prefer doing things face to face and stuff?”

“That's part of it. But, the bigger reason, is because Zel is a tetrad demon. You do not send messengers to speak to tetrad demons. You speak to them yourself.”

“Tetrawhat?”

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~~David~~

When he wasn't afraid of being torn up and eaten, or being tortured, Hell was actually kinda awesome.

Yes, he wasn't supposed to be here. Yes, as far as he could tell, no angel was going to swoop down and save him. Yes, he was probably doomed to a very shitty life in Hell, and he had no idea if it'd even end with one life. Other souls became remnants when they died, and had to live and die shitty lives in unending, excruciating pain, without even the ability speak to the people around them. He very much did not want that to happen to him. But, Jes and Dao insisted that was determined by the number written on souls' heads, the mark of the 'Beast', something even they didn't really understand. Far as they knew, 'Beast' was just ancient language talk, and meaningless.

So they didn't know what would happen to him if he died, and he was in no rush to find out. But, now that he wasn't intensely worried about incoming pain and death, he could actually take a moment to look around at Hell's landscape. It was badass, like a metal album cover. The massive mountains of jagged stone, most of it black but some stones stained a suspicious shade of red, the weird metal pillars with metal skull braziers on them, the amber veins that glowed and pulsed slowly, the bones, even the fucking sky of fire. Hell was kinda awesome.

Easy to say since Hell wasn't currently trying to kill him. If he'd had a mark, demons would have either eaten his heart already and he'd be spending X lives as a remnant. Or maybe they'd have taken him back to their lair, tortured him, raped him — some demons were that fucked up, according to Jes

and Dao — and then eaten him. Or, he could have willingly accepted some demon blood, and become a betrayer. Stronger and faster than most humans, but doomed to 666 deaths in Hell.

But he didn't fit into any of those categories. He was unmarked, special. For better or worse, that at least meant he didn't have to worry about dying horribly at the moment, especially with Jes and Dao protecting him. Which meant he got to look around and admire how freaking awesome some of the environment was. Every so often, the path through the mountains revealed a random statue, and Jes and Dao insisted it hadn't been carved. Hell had grown it.

One of the statues gave him pause, one that was crouching in a ready-to-pounce position in the nook of a ravine wall.

“Holy shit,” he said, “what is that?”

“That,” Jes said, grinning at him as she came up beside him, “is a bolstara, one of the tetrad.”

“Bo—”

“Yes yes I'll fucking explain, nerd. There's four big boss species of demon that have been around since the Spires War.”

“Spi—”

She slapped him against the back of the head. Gently, but enough to shut him up.

“Later. So, tetrad demons. Big, giant, fucking scary. Hot as fuck though, right?” The gargoyle walked up to the half crouching demon, turned, and posed. “This is a statue of Zelandariel, spire ruler of Death's Grip. Hell does love to grow statues of spire rulers.”

Jes was a few inches shy of seven feet tall. The bolstara demon was over ten feet tall, and she had four arms. Hooves, too, though her figure was more slender than Dao's more thick, curvy legs. She had four giant black horns that flowed backward, majestically even, and her skull elongated back behind her a bit, emphasizing the crown-like look. No wings, no tail, but her black hair tendrils flowed down from her skull, thick tendrils that were braided and filled with weird little spikes.

Oh, not spikes. Bones. Her tendrils had little bones weaved into them.

David walked up to the huge statue and looked up at her gorgeous face. No nose? No, she had a nose, but it was mostly flat and subtle, with tiny nostrils he almost couldn't see. From a distance, he couldn't see it at all, instead giving her face a really alien mask look that was exotic, and beautiful. Long, slender cheeks, and unusually narrow eyes that had long outer corners, like a woman emphasizing with mascara.

Unlike Dao and Jes, she was naked. That was a very slender stomach, and a couple of perky breasts. Not large, but it was kind of hard to even notice that, considering how complex and large the rest of her body was. He almost didn't notice the nipple chain connecting her nipples, and other bits of metal jewelry around her fingers, wrists, her ankles above her hooves, and a necklace.

Daoka clicked a few times.

"I know, right?" Jes said. "Fucking so damn hot. But she's not too happy with me, for leaving. Even less happy for trying to kill Diogo." Shrugging, she walked past Zel's statue, up to Dao, and kissed her. "But not as hot as you, big-titted goat bitch."

With some high-pitched fast clicks, Dao chuckled and kissed Jes back, before hopping away back onto the path. But she stopped a few feet along, turned, looked to David, and held out her hand. She thought he was a puppy, someone to protect. The strangest stroke of luck he'd ever received, and probably ever would. Awesome.

David gave the ridiculously tall, strangely hot four-armed demon a second glance. No tail and hooves, like a satyr, er, riiva, but the resemblances ended there. Even the four horns were different, Dao's curling so she could literally ram into people while Zel's flowed backward.

Hell was a strange place.

"Anyway," Jeskura said, "tetrad demons are the strongest demons around, since Belor died, last child of the Old Ones. And before you ask, tetrad because there are four types. Zel is a bolstara. There's fujara, korgejin and gorujin."

Wait a second. Gorgala and riiva, and Jes already explained some others, like tregeera, devorjins, and vratorins. Now a bolstara, fujara, korgejin, and gorujin. Weird species names, but there was a pattern there, a very weird pattern.

"Are the... fujara, female-like? And the korgejin and gorujin male-like? 'In' and 'a'?"

She grinned back at him.

"Figured it out quick."

Uh oh, ego stroke, his biggest weakness. He couldn't help but smile, and squirm.

"That's weird though. Why name the different sexes a different species?"

"'Cause they're not really different sexes. Ain't no demons down here giving birth."

"I... what?"

Laughing, she slipped an arm around his shoulders and hugged him to her side as they walked.

“Live long enough and maybe you’ll get to see a hatchery.”

“Hat—”

She squeezed her arm around his neck, putting a quick end to his question.

“Just focus on staying alive for now, okay? Keep your head down. We gotta make a trip near Gorzen Eye to find my friend Zreeg. He’ll help us set up the traps and shit.”

“Zre—”

“A borjin. Souls call them minotaurs. Come on.” She let him go, flapped her wings, and leapt ahead.

Daoka stuck with David. In fact, she slipped her arm around his neck and shoulders, too, and clicked quietly at him. Almost a purr.

“I, uh...”

She clicked a few more times, and ran the blunt side of a claw down his chest, before leaning in closer and clicking more, again like a purr, lips inches from his ear.

“Yeah, I feel it too,” Jeskura said.

“Um, feel what?” he asked, squirming a bit under Dao’s arm. She didn’t let go.

“Been feeling kinda tingly ever since yesterday. Not like I normally put my tongue inside Dao with fresh meat nearby, watching.”

“R-Right.” He gulped as Dao chuckled, clicked slowly a few more times, and traced her claw closer down his naked chest, his abs, and toward his crotch.

“Dao!” Jes slapped her tail against the stone. “It’s not him. You feel a sin aura coming off him? ‘Cause I don’t. I don’t know what’s up, but it can’t be coming from him. Something’s definitely in the air, but he’s just fresh meat who shouldn’t be here.”

Dao frowned and let go of David, but she smiled at him anyway as she hopped ahead.

Thank. God. He was half a second away from getting hard with the way Dao was all over him. Which itself was pretty weird. Wasn’t she in a relationship with Jes? Jes didn’t seem to mind, either. Open relationship? Or, just... a couple of demons that didn’t mind putting a man between them for a sandwich every now and then?

He slapped himself in the face. The only option, with no access to a cold shower.

Jes looked back at him. “The fuck?”

“Nothing. Nothing.” You’re in the middle of Hell you god damn pervert. Focus!

After a quiet, pained groaned, he bounced his weight on his feet a few times, hopefully getting some blood flowing away from his dick — if that was even how blood worked in his afterlife body — before he jogged after them. And hey, his feet didn’t hurt much anymore. Silver lining.

“I don’t suppose I could get some clothes?” he asked. “I dunno, just... something so I’m not naked?”

“Ha. Yeah, maybe. You’ll only be painting more of a target on your back, but I suppose if you’re with us, any other demons who see us will just think you’re a betrayer from a distance. Some demons let their betrayers wear armor when hunting. And hopefully any demon who sees us won’t recognize Dao and me unless we get too close.”

“You two are really wanted? Bounties on your head and stuff?”

Daoka clicked a few times, softly, head hanging, until Jes rubbed her shoulder.

“We are. That fucking asshole Diogo needs to die, and Tacitus too while we’re at it. Just a couple shitlords who got into power because they’re bigger than most, and they’re making life hell for us.”

Pun? Jes didn’t smile. Not pun.

“Making life Hell? As opposed... to...”

Sighing, Jeskura shook her head as she sat down on a big boulder. They were almost out of the ravine between the two big mountains, the bigger one called Adam’s Back according to Jes, but they still had a bit to go. Jes or Dao took thirty second rests frequently, usually on top of a ledge or big rock, something to give them visibility of the area.

“Okay, yes, for fresh meat Hell is always Hell. But for demons, sometimes it’s good, sometimes it’s not. Zel’s got it up her ass to get ready for another war, so the bailiffs are cracking down, trying to get all the demons in Death’s Grip cooperating. And they’re not gentle about it. If we don’t want to be part of the horde Zel is bound to eventually summon, the bailiffs kill us.” Flaring her wings, she looked out to the ravine exit, growling, tail flicking left and right behind her. “Diogo killed our friend Leos to make an example. I’m going to kill him to make an example. First Diogo, and then Tacitus, so he leaves Daoka the fuck alone.”

The look in her eyes made it clear, it’d be a bad idea to ask about Leos.

“So, um, assuming this Diogo demon, assuming he, uh... jumps out of the way of the rock you intend to roll onto his head. What happens after that?”

She snapped her red eyes down at him, and he froze.

“Then I roll a bigger rock. We got some time to set this shit up before we take you to him. We’ll make sure the traps are good.”

Something clicked into place about his two companions, and he winced as he looked past her down the ravine. It opened up, exposing the landscape, the distant red river, and more distant mountains. And rocks. And mountains. And stones. And mountains.

“Good luck setting up a trap that you can just... roll down a hill. This isn’t some kinda dense jungle. This whole place is just big, open, and easy to fly over, right?”

“Demons can’t fly.”

“What?”

Jes stretched out her wings and gestured to them and their soft, red undersides.

“Demons can’t fly. Glide, sure, but can’t fly. Only angels can do that.”

He nodded, taking his chin into his fingers. Good to know, good to know.

“So, the traps. There going to be netting?”

“Nope.”

“Spike pits?”

“Nope.”

“Uh... some hellbeast or whatever, that you can unleash?”

“No.”

“Is there—”

“What’s the problem, fresh meat? We’re gonna set up some traps with Zreeg’s help, dump a bunch of giant boulders on Diogo and his group, and kill him. I don’t see the issue.”

It clicked into place again. He’d known people like her in the past, people who wore their thoughts on their sleeves, and talked big game. They even had the enthusiasm and will to pursue those pursuits, right into the dumpster fire their plans inevitably became.

Jeskura was a dumbass.

He looked at Daoka, and found her nodding as she looked between him and the gargoyle. Even without eyes, he could see her totally trusting expression, the satyr putting her utmost faith in her lover.

Daoka was also a dumbass.

But, they were a pair of dumbasses who'd saved his life, and were plenty strong. And at least compared to the imps and grems he'd seen, and the other demons on the river, they were nice. He owed them.

“Okay, rolling boulders sounds great and all, until you try to do it. I know you're both strong, but it won't be easy. You'll have to roll a lot, and it's not like Diogo and his crew are just going to stand there and let themselves get flattened.” He came out of the ravine a little further, squinted, and analyzed the mountains as best he could. “Will they have to go near one of the cliff walls on their trek?”

“The most common path from Gorzen Eye to the spire runs through a ravine, with a mountain on one side, yeah.”

“A ravine, like this one?” He gestured around.

“Yeap.”

He nodded, stroking his chin some more. “Then you might be able to set up a pincer trap. Or hammer and anvil, roll a bunch of rocks down from the ravine end toward them while you run at them from the back. Or maybe, if we're lucky, and Zreeg is as strong as you make him sound, you might be able to create a small avalanche. Find some really flat cliff face and smash the base of it, and it'll come tumbling down.” Assuming Hell followed the laws of physics, which seemed suspect at best.

Jes and Dao looked at each other, said nothing for a few seconds, before Jes hopped down off her perch and came up to him.

“You got a brain?”

“What?”

She poked him in the forehead with her right wing's thumb claw.

“Brain. You're smart?”

“I uh... I think so.”

“Think so?”

“I mean, high school was a breeze, and I was doing my second year at university without any trouble? So, I guess I am? A bit?”

She eyed him, leaned down until she was only a few inches from his face, and poked him in the chest again.

“You’re a shitty liar, fresh meat. Come on, tell me the truth. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

He groaned.

“I’m... very smart.” Might as well. “Not a genius or anything, but yes, I am very smart. Honestly, when I realized I was being sent to Hell, I figured it was either because I have the sex drive of a bonobo, or because I’m proud. Very proud. I am very smart.”

Jes stepped back, and smiled.

“I knew there was something I liked about you.”

“I’m smart?”

“Nah, fuck that! I mean, I’ll use that, it’s useful.” She came up, stood beside him, and wrapped one of her wings around him. He fit snug against the side of her chest and armor, and he gulped as he looked up at her. “You have no idea, fresh meat, how absolutely fucking oblivious most souls are to their own shit. Most of them can’t even believe they’re shitty enough to warrant being sent to Hell. Fucking nasty shits who don’t know themselves in the fucking slightest. Not you, though.”

“Really?”

“Yeah really. You probably didn’t get along with people much, did you?”

Jes pulled no punches. The fact she was a demon and talked to him like she knew humans intimately made it very weird, and every time she opened her mouth, he was surprised by how familiar the way she talked sounded. For just a single, weird second, he thought he was being teased by one of the girls he worked with in class in university.

He was tempted to make a jab about her watching the scrying pool too much.

“No. I didn’t.”

“Course not, cocky ass. You think humans like talking straight? Humans, at least the ones who end up here, are almost always lying, sniveling little shits who can’t go three seconds without trying to trick other people, and more often, themselves. Bunch of cowards.” Laughing again, she gave him a gentle headbutt with her forehead, and took lead of their little hiking group again. “You seem like you’re honest with yourself. Demons are honest with themselves. Humans aren’t.”



He smiled after her, watching her tail sway from side to side. Okay, so, Jes and Dao weren't smart, but maybe they were wise? He never subscribed to the whole intelligence versus wisdom thing, but maybe he should have.

"You and Mia would get along," he said.

"Why's that?"

"She wanted to be a psychologist. Figure people out. Help them." And unlike him, Mia had no trouble wearing her empathy openly. David had lots of empathy, and it made him uncomfortable as hell. He was happier keeping it inside, in a nice box only he could open.

Mia was right. He could not stop analyzing shit, his own thoughts included.

"Hell could use a few shrinks," Jeskura said. "Lots of fucked up demons down here that could use a little help."

He laughed. "For a second, I thought you were gonna say she could help the souls down here. I... I keep forgetting where I am."

"I'd say you'll get used to it, but most fresh meat are dead in the first day, or only last a few weeks. Some can go a few months. Betrayers can go decades."

"Before they die of old age?"

She grinned back at him. "Nobody ages in the afterlife, fresh meat."

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Beads of sweat dripped down his body, and he ignored them. The heat of Hell was relentless, and the breeze did nothing to settle it, but it never crossed the point of too hot. Uncomfortable, but not unlivable. He expected to reek with all the sweat eventually, but it didn't happen, either. All he could smell, was hints of rock, fire, and minerals on the breeze, and he was pretty sure the mineral smell was blood.

Jes and Dao didn't sweat a drop.

The closer they got to the Gorzen Eye cave, the more demons there were, and it wasn't long before David gave up on trying to study Hell. Every moment, every step, his eyes snapped around to the various boulders, ditches, and jagged small mountains and ravines that decorated their path, scanning

for movement. Supposedly, deeper in the valley, there was a big cave, Gorzen Eye, where Diogo and hundreds of the demons in this part of Death's Grip, Gorzen Mountains, called home.

Who the fuck was Gorzen? Jes didn't know. Neither did Daoka. Jes said to ask Caera, which of course led to him asking who that was, and her just laughing and telling him he'd meet her later. Why was the mountain they'd just left called Adam's Back? Why was the river the portal had dropped him off over called Adam's Blood? Ask Caera, she might know. Who the fuck was Caera!?

Jes and Dao crouched low, and he crouched doubly low. If they were worried about the path ahead, it was probably a good idea he'd be doubly worried. He only poked his head up enough to get a glimpse over the rocks, and spot the demons moving in the distance. Lots of imps and grems flying through the air, clicking and screeching. No, not flying. Gliding. They climbed the cliffs and threw themselves off before opening their wings and catching the air, and did enormous circles in the sky.

David crouched lower. Maybe his red hair and freckles would blend him into the environment? A lot of the stones were black, but a lot of them were also red, or stained red by blood, hard to tell. Not many glowing amber veins were out there either, so as long as David they stayed close to rocks, he wouldn't be easy to spot.

The air shimmered with heat, blurring things, hopefully enough to make it harder to spot them.

Dao and Jes never looked up.

"Are we not avoiding imps and grems?" he asked.

Dao shook her head, clicking as she gestured to herself and Jes.

"Yeah, imps and grems aren't much of a worry," Jes said. "Just a bunch of chatterboxes only interested in spotting a meal. They don't listen to orders. Usually."

"They don't?"

"Nah. They're like squirrels."

"Squ—right, the scrying pools."

She grinned back at him. "Ever try and train a squirrel army and make it do your bidding?"

"No one's ever tried that. I think."

"Same thing. Best you can really get with imps and grems is coexistence. They do their own thing. And for some reason, Hell births more of them the more you kill." She shrugged, still crouching low and still heading down the valley.

“Hell births?”

“Jesus christ you never stop.”

“Nope.”

She laughed, quieter than usual, and grinned back at him before looking back up at the sky.

“Just, don’t make any loud noises. I know this path well, and the demons who stay in Gorzen Eye don’t usually take it.”

“What about other demons?”

“Oh other demons take it all the time.” She smirked. Sarcasm? He had no idea. “Dao will protect you while I’m gone. Unless it’s a tregeera or devorjin, then she’ll take you to safety.”

He breathed deep, wiped the sweat from his brow, and—

“Wait. Jesus Christ. Did he exist?”

“Fuck me I don’t know, fresh meat. Ask Caera. The only human I know of that was in the bible and in Hell was Cain, and nobody’s seen him in fucking forever, long before I hatched.”

“How long ago was that?” he asked, a billion questions rapid firing in his head. She eyed him, and snapped him in the thigh with her tail. “Ow! Hey!”

“Never ask a woman her age!”

“I... I... what the fuck?”

Daoka burst into laughter, failing to keep it suppressed, before slipping an arm around his shoulders and hugging him to her side again. He didn’t mind.

Jes laughed too, of course.

“Hard to count the years down here, fresh meat. We don’t have seasons.”

“Oh. No way to count the years?”

“Just the scrying pools, or literally counting the days if you care enough. Most demons don’t bother. But I must have been, I dunno, a few hundred days old when I saw my first scrying pool. That was the 60s, on the surface.”

“Okay, so assuming you were born in the early 1960s, that means you’re... probably around sixty years old?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“You uh... you look good, for a sixty years old.”

Jeskura stared at him, and he winced, waiting for the inevitable laughter.

She didn't, other than a small, warm chuckle. She grinned, winked at him, and returned to walking the path.

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Half a day. He didn't know how he knew that, but he did. The swirling maelstroms of fire overhead had an ebb and flow to them, somewhere between ocean waves and a lava lamp, except flames instead of water and blobs of oil. No sun, no moon, nothing, just fire and a warm breeze that never provided relief. Somehow, his afterlife ghost brain knew the night and day cycle, kinda, sorta. Good enough.

Cries and groans ahead brought him to a standstill, but Daoka gave him a gentle push from behind.

“Just remnants, David. Come on.” The gargoyle flicked her tail, and continued down past him into a small ravine, walls only eight or ten feet tall and the same distance apart.

It wouldn't have been hard to go up and around, but it did mean completely exposing themselves on all angles. Dangerous, but not too dangerous, with Jes and Dao protecting him. But they wanted to take the ravine, so, the ravine it was, right into the noises. He'd seen a few remnants, walking through the mountain paths with these two, but he'd never gotten close to one.

This, was the shit Dante wrote about.

The screaming men and women, naked and emaciated, reached out for him from the walls. 231. 145. 412. Many more. Their eyes were bloodshot, and their fingernails bled as they tore at the rocks that bound them. Broken teeth. Ripped skin. Desperate cries.

David froze at the entrance of the ravine, and clenched his fists tight at his sides. A bead of sweat dripped down his face, and the sound of the remnants, their weeping screams, couldn't block out the sound of his heartbeat in his ears. All he could smell was blood, to the point he could taste it. Small pools of the red liquid littered the ravine, disappearing into the red-stained stone before new pools appeared, created from the blood dripping from the remnants above them.

Before, he'd been wondering why Hell felt so real, so natural, so evolutionary. Where were the metaphors given form, the poetry, the insane shit from the bible, giant creatures with many mouths breathing fire, and shit like that. He'd almost been looking forward to seeing some of the more epic stuff. Not anymore.

Daoka clicked softly a few times, and pushed him along.

“Dao’s right. Don’t feel bad for remnants, fresh meat.” Jes raised a hand, aiming for one of the remnants, and—

“Don’t!”

Jes stared at him. He’d have stared at himself if he had a mirror. That wasn’t like him.

“Don’t? Fresh meat, I know you don’t belong in Hell, but you’re gonna have to toughen up. You got a problem with killing a remnant? The fuck you gonna do when another human jumps you and tries to strangle you to death? Or eat you for the essence?”

“Cannibalism?”

“Humans need essence. You think they’re strong enough to kill a demon? Forbidden fruit are rare, and humans are not. And in case you forgot, this is Hell. The souls down here are fucking horrible, and every single one of them will end you if it means they avoid becoming this.” She gestured to the remnant closest to her. A man, old, broken, reaching the furthest out from the wall because the stone swallowing his legs didn’t reach past his hips, unlike the others.

Jeskura slashed her claws across the remnant’s face, and they ran deep. Soft flesh. Soft bone. The remnant died instantly, desperate eyes rolling up before the whole body fell apart. The joints tore apart, skin and flesh fell away from the bones, and the pile of gore splattered on the rocks.

The number on the forehead changed, from 426, to 425.

“Yeah I know it sucks, Dave, but toughen up and get used to it. Dao doesn’t want to lose her new pet.” Like she’d done it a million times before, the gargoyle swept the blood and bones aside with her tail, and continued on.

David sucked in a breath, and walked. The exact center of the path was enough to avoid the reach of most of the remnants, but not all, and there were a couple times he had to yank his hand or foot away from one. They had weak grip. Not so weak he could afford to get pulled into the wall, and have forty weak hands working together to rip him apart, though. Many hands make light work.

Yanking his hand free caused one of the remnants' wrists to tear open. David kicked the hand off him, and tried and failed to hold back his groans.

"I feel like... there should be some sort of lesson to learn," he said. "Like, I can't just... just... walk through what might as well be the valley of the shadow of death, and not figure out... something."

Daoka clicked a few times as she pat his shoulder from behind.

"Dao says there's only one lesson to learn down here, fresh meat. Hell sucks."

"It's Hell!" He yanked his hand away from another remnant, and hissed as the woman's fingernails cut his skin. She'd probably lost her fingernails to do it, but he didn't look back to check. "There has to be some purpose to it all, right?"

"Oh, that's what this is about? 'Cause I can tell you right now, even the oldest tetrad demon doesn't know the answer. If there's a purpose to Hell, it's long forgotten. If God exists, the asshole hasn't shown themselves in fucking ages." She shrugged, like it was a perfectly acceptable thing for her entire plane of existence to not make sense.

Dao clicked a few times, and rubbed David's head, all too much like petting a puppy.

"Yeah, true," Jes said. "She said some of the older demons call all this shit the Forlorn Tower." With an almost depressed chuckle, Jes gestured around them, and upward. "Heaven, Hell, and the surface. Forlorn. Ain't nobody here but us."

"No God?"

"No God."

"Just... wow, really?"

"If we get time, maybe we can take a climb up Adam's Back, and I'll point out the False Gate vortex. A big fucking tornado, from the burning sky all the way down to nearly touch to the ground at False Gate, filled with lightning and hellfire and energy no one fucking understands anymore. Far as anyone knows, Lucifer created it so it could open a path to Heaven, so they and their demons could attack the holy city. Which of course didn't work, I'm guessing, considering we're all still here, in this shit hole."

"But..."

"But? But there's no but. The vortex is still there."

He pushed past the last of the remnants double-time, and caught up with Jes as they climbed out of the ravine. Plenty of mountains and cliffs around, big rocks, places for them to hide as they walked, but they crouched low anyway.

“Wait, so... you know for sure Lucifer existed?”

“We don’t know shit, just some stories, or some ancient runes if you can find them and read them. Don’t matter. My point is, if God was still around, you’d think they’d leave a vortex that cuts straight to Heaven there?”

No, no he... or they, wouldn’t. Not that he knew shit either, but it did seem like something God would fix, since it kinda shit all over the Heaven Hell dynamic if people could go from one to the other.

“So, there’s really a vortex connecting Heaven and Hell?”

“Yeap. Dangerous as fuck, and since demons can’t fly, the only people using the vortex are angels. Or at least, that’s what I’ve heard. Closest I’ve been to False Gate was, what, somewhere between the Black Valley and Angel’s Spine? How the fuck would I know?”

“I... don’t suppose you can just call? There’s no magic bauble, crystal ball, special kind of scrying pool? How do the spires communicate?”

Jes laughed, struggling to keep it quiet.

“Welcome to the Dark Ages, pipsqueak. Want to talk to someone? Get on a hellbeast, maybe a goort, and ride. Usually takes a month of hard running to get from one spire to the next.”

It was like a slap to the face. Cold, harsh reality, completely at odds with the warm air and absurdity around him. It was the number one thing people took for granted about the modern age, and that was instantaneous communication. There was a time when it took months for news to circulate even a small country. The only people you really knew were the people in your village, and anyone within twenty minutes of walking distance.

He shook his head. “That can’t be right. We have puddles of water that let us see anything we want on the surface, but we can’t talk to each other unless it’s face to face?”

“Hey, if you can convince an angel to fly around carrying messages, by all means. But for the rest of us, you wanna say something, you say it in person. That’s why I know Diogo’s going to take you to Zel in person, remember? You can’t just—” She crouched lower, and snapped her head back at David and Dao. “Down. Quiet. No sounds.”

“N—”

Daoka slipped her hand around his mouth and pushed down on his shoulders with the other. Not a single click.

His heart jumped up into his throat, and his eyes shot around in a panic, but Jes and Dao didn't move. They were listening. All he could hear was the remnants behind him, but Jes heard something else, and she held up a finger to her lips as she looked at him.

After a few seconds of nothing, long enough for his heart rate to slow down to just very high, not absurdly high, Dao removed her hands, and nudged her horns against the side of his head before walking past him. Jes and Dao crept ahead a little further, talons and hooves silent on the stones. A few feet further along the rock and path, Jes poked her head up over a ridge.

She gestured for David, and he came, doing his best to not make noise. Somehow, despite being barefoot and having no talons or hooves, he still managed to make more noise than the two demons, but quiet enough it was lost under the remnants, the roaring fire above, and the relentlessly warm breeze. But if he misstepped, one slip on one pebble would make a sharp sound, and that'd punch right through the background sounds.

Jes motioned him closer. With a slow, deep breath, he came up beside her and peeked over the rock ridge.

People. Humans. A dozen humans crept along through the rocks and stones, each wearing cloaks made of the same dark red leather Jes and Dao slept on. They worked amazingly well, a perfect shade that fit into the glow of the burning sky, the dark rock, and the blood stains that coated everything. Perfect camouflage.

He half expected to see them wielding primal spears, but there weren't any trees anywhere, not ones any sane person would turn into a weapon. Forbidden fruit were at the top of the food chain of importance. Instead, the humans had swords and axes. Big, black things that were more like slabs of metal banged together. Heavy, hard to use. Only half the humans had them, the bigger six, every one of them bigger than David, and every one of them obviously weighed down by the huge weapons strapped to their sides.

One of the humans turned, and looked up to the rocks. David froze.

They looked perfectly normal. A woman, a regular woman, the kind you found billions of on the surface, albeit wearing some of the same armor bits Jes and Dao wore. Curved chunks of black metal, beaten into shape the same way the weapons were, held on by leather straps darker than their cloaks. Not as much, just enough to cover a few body parts, usually the stomach. But none of that scared him.



It was her eyes. Her eyes looked up to the rocks, and stared, wide. She was too far to see David as anything more than a bump on the rocks that matched all the other rocks, but her eyes were so damn wide he could see them clearly. Ice shot up through his veins, staring into those eyes. If he moved, it might give up where he was, but he couldn't move even if he wanted to. All he could do was stare at the woman as she scanned the billion rocks around her, including the ones David, Jes, and Dao hid behind, before she moved on.

The three of them watched the twelve humans continue. Like them, the dozen souls didn't stick to any simple, easy path. They climbed up and down ravines, cliffs, and slipped around rocks like they knew the place as much as the demons did. Whoever these humans were, they'd been around for a long time.

Once they were gone, Jes sat down against the rocks they hid behind, and David and Dao followed suit.

"I'm surprised you didn't run out and join them," Jes said, smirking at him.

"You... You said I shouldn't trust other souls."

"I did, but for all I knew you wouldn't listen to me. Good thing you did. I've seen fresh meat run into Cainites, thinking they'd found friends, only to get chopped up and eaten."

"Fucking christ."

"Cainites, or just roaming bands. And that was just a scouting party. You can find groups of hundreds of humans working in these mountains, hiding in the tunnels, killing random demons unlucky enough to stumble onto them."

"Really?" he asked. "Diogo doesn't just, summon a hunting party and exterminate them?"

"Ha. You really overestimate how organized Hell is, David. Maybe up in the Navameere Fields or the Red Pits, Morgana and Khazeer might have the demons under control. Everywhere else, not so much. Zel's doing her best to get Death's Grip running smooth, and she's made some progress. But..."

Daoka clicked a few times and gave David a pat on the knee.

"Exactly," Jes said. "Humans, even humans ready to eat each other, have this nasty habit of getting into groups and cooperating, especially when they have something to group up around. A person, or an idea. Cain's both."

David groaned as he let his head hang.

"I fucking hate people."

“Ha, yeah?”

“Yes, I fucking hate people. Mindless animals without a single critical thought going through their heads. Stupid, selfish, self-obsessed, ignorant sheep. They can’t reason. They can only follow the group.” He looked at his right hand, and squeezed, imagining punching a moron, any moron, with enough force to break a jaw, like he’d imagined a hundred times before.

That rant came out of nowhere. He blinked down at the ground, and then Jes, as if she could explain. Jes just smiled at him, reached out, and poked him in the shoulder with her wing’s thumb claw.

“That’s the sort of thinking that’ll get you sent to Hell.”

He petrified. Living flesh to solid stone in half a second.

“...r-really?”

Jes choked on a laugh, but she couldn’t stop it, and it came out loud as she clutched her gut.

“No, you fucking puppy. I mean, it sounds like you got some personal issues, but I don’t think Hell goes around scooping up people like you.”

He let go of the breath he didn’t know he was holding.

“I guess. I didn’t—”

A battle cry cut through the noise, the remnants, the wind, their voices, everything. A shadow sped over the stones. David froze again.

Two blurs grabbed his eyes. One came low, close to the rocks, a dark red leather cloak billowing around them as they came in with a battle axe obviously too heavy for them. One came high, someone jumping, someone with a sword held in both hands over their head, a sword too big and heavy for them. Gravity appreciated the height and weight, though.

Jes dove to the side, and the man with the big sword smashed the huge slab of black into the stone hard enough it drew sparks. But the woman with the axe was waiting. She came at Jes from the side, and swung the axe horizontal. Jes jumped back, but not fast enough, and the axe hit her in the arm, deep enough a splatter of red blood cut across the stone, and over David’s chest. He didn’t move.

Daoka charged past him. For a second, some cogs in his brain somehow still turning, he thought maybe Daoka aimed for the woman with the axe she struggled to wield. But she went for the other target instead. The satyr rammed into the man with the sword hard enough the crunch of ribs was almost as loud as his screams. That didn’t stop him from swinging his sword at Daoka anyway, eyes wide, foaming at the mouth like a starving, rabid dog.

Somewhere in the dark matter of David's brain, a strange thought bubbled up to the surface. Daoka grabbed the man's sword arm, and ripped it off, as the quiet words fell out of David's mouth, lost under the sounds of murder. 'Don't hurt them'. He tried to say the words louder, but nothing came out. The only sounds were more screams, as Daoka threw the sword wielder against the nearest boulder, and charged into them again. More crunching bones, her four horns hitting him in the chest with all the grace of a large ram breaking down a door.

So much for David's supposed hatred of people. For some stupid fucking reason, watching this man get beaten and broken, felt horrible.

The man went down, clutching his chest with his one arm, and Daoka sliced open his throat with an almost casual slash of her claws. Before the man even realized it was his blood gushing out onto his chest, Daoka jumped over to Jeskura.

Oh shit, the gargoyle. David forced his eyes away from the dying, one-armed man, and the sword he still somehow held onto with his one hand, and looked at Jeskura. The woman she'd been fighting was already dead, and in worst condition than the swordsman. Demon strength, was unreal. Ripping off an arm was already an extremely difficult thing to do, something no normal human could do, not without years and years of training and probably an unhealthy amount of steroids. Ripping off a leg, was another thing entirely.

"Fucking hell," Jes said, snarling as she clutched her arm. "Fucking fucking fuck. Let my guard down. Fucking David making me laugh and shit."

Daoka clicked furiously as she helped Jes back up to her feet, and held out Jes's arm in front of her.

"Yeah yeah, I know. I blame you, you know?"

Daoka stood up straight, clicked some more, and hit Jes in a horn with one of her own hard enough to earn tiny yelp from the gargoyle.

"He's your pet! I shouldn't be explaining things to him."

More clicks.

"Well fuck me, I can't help it. And besides, it'll take years to teach him Hellian. You think he'll last that long?"

Sighing, Daoka reached down for the one-legged corpse, and slid the one piece of metal that covered her chest and one of her breasts, and down to her stomach. And just like she did with theimps

and grems, she slammed a hand down into the corpse's chest hard, hard enough her claws broke through flesh and skin. With some arm power, she used both hands and pulled apart, and David gulped down the need to puke — he couldn't anyway — as the woman's ribs broke apart.

David watched. He walked past the now dead man, half sitting against the rock David had been hiding behind, and looked down at the mess Daoka made as she ripped the woman open. And tore out her heart.

She handed the bleeding thing and the torn tubes still on it to Jeskura, and the gargoyle smiled at her lover before munching it down. A human heart. Similar to the other hearts he'd seen them rip out, but not the same. This was a heart he'd seen before, during his autopsy.

He stared down at the body, the broken rib cage, the hint of guts he could almost see under the skin fold flaps by her sternum. The blood flowed, and the stones of Hell drank it down like a hungry sponge. A human body, just like his own, lying on rocks under a fire sky, instead of a metal table and cold LED lighting.

And the two demons were eating a chunk of it.

Daoka grabbed the dead woman's cloak, ripped off a long chunk of it, and tied it around the deep wound in Jeskura's arm. The woman had hit her just above the metal armor covering the outside of her right bicep, almost deep enough to hit bone, and the blood Jes leaked was more than enough to risk a death to blood loss. But she shrugged it off like it didn't matter, and used her good arm to hold the heart to her mouth as she scarfed it down.

"Let's get out of here," she said. "These two were probably with the others. They'll circle back when their rear scouts don't report back, and I don't want to fight twelve of these assholes."

Daoka clicked, nodding as she went back to David. Gulping hard enough it hurt his throat, he stood up straight and stared at the satyr. She clicked at him softly a few times, nudged him aside, and grabbed the dead man she'd killed. And again, in a bloody mess, she used her demon strength to rip open the human man's chest and tear out his heart.

David didn't move away from the splatter of blood that hit his waist, and the puddle that pushed out and coated the bottom of his feet.

Even when Daoka held out the heart to him and clicked gently, he didn't move. A heavy chunk of muscle that once pumped blood, or whatever it was in the afterlife, sitting in her claws. And for some reason, a part of him wanted to bite into it.

"I thought... hearts only had resonance. And humans—"

“Resonance and essence,” Jes said. “The rest of the body has some essence, and very little resonance. Most of the resonance is in the heart, but there’s a lot of essence in there, too.”

“So humans run around, killing each other, eating each other’s hearts...” He stared at the heart, but did not hold out his hand.

“Give it up, Dao. You know how fresh meat is at first. Give him a few weeks.”

Dao pouted at him, but after a few seconds of waiting, she bit into the heart, ripping a chunk out of it. Half of it gone, she gave it to Jes, and the gargoyle finished it off. It did make more sense for them to eat it anyway, if they needed to keep eating, while humans only needed to eat rarely, or if injured. He was fine. Jes was bleeding. And the skirmish made it damn clear he was fucking useless in a fight against humans.

That was a fucking horrible feeling.

Clicking quietly to herself, Daoka leaned back down over the man and removed his cloak. Off came the two other pieces too, a single chunk of metal that covered most of the man’s chest and stomach with straps to attach it, and another piece that was basically a skirt. Daoka handed them to David, and he stared down at the bloody things and the crimson drops that fell from them onto his toes. Warm.

“Dao,” Jes said. “He can’t keep the clothes. We’ll have to strip him when we take him to Diogo.”

Dao clicked loudly several times at the gargoyle.

“Ugh, fine. Maybe it’ll keep him alive next time we get jumped and he just stands there like a statue.”

Ouch.

He looked back to the corpse, and the dead, empty look in his eyes. How casually Daoka had stripped the gory mess naked, and given David his clothes. And as if what she’d done was as normal as breathing, Daoka nodded at him and hopped after Jeskura, leaving David alone with the wet leather.

“Come on fresh meat. We can’t stay here.”

He nodded, staring at the clothes. They were just clothes. Clothes soaked in blood. But everything was soaked in blood, and Hell would suck up the blood soon enough.

Freak out later. For now, just do what you need to do.

He put on the cloak and the kilt he swore he'd seen Conan wear. The breastplate thing though had three leather straps that had to be tied together behind his back.

“Um, can—”

Dao hopped back to him, pushed his cloak aside, and tied the three straps together behind him, nice and snug so the heavy slab of metal pressed to his chest, covering most of his left pectoral, and all of his stomach.

“Thanks. Thanks.” Okay, wow, heavy breastplate. Whatever this black metal was, it was a good thing he was in good shape or he'd be falling straight onto his tits.

Case in point, he picked up the sword, and try as he might, couldn't hold back the groan of exertion. Dao and Jes laughed, and the satyr took the sword and set it down.

“You're still our prisoner, fresh meat,” Jes said, grinning at him down the path. “Not gonna let you arm yourself.”

“Yeah, I figured. And I... don't think I could wield these weapons anyway.”

“Neither could they.”

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Dao and David sat in a crevice, facing each other, the crevice only a few feet wide so their legs lay next to each other's. Her hooves were exactly what he expected, bigger though, almost as big as a horse's. It made sense, with how much she jumped around, and how she had to balance on them.

“No horseshoes?” he asked, gesturing to them.

She chuckled, clicks slipping between the soft sound, before shaking her head. Of course she knew what horseshoes were, with scrying pools keeping demonkind informed about everything on the surface.

They weren't far from the big cave, but Jes assured them the crevice was safe, not visible from the cave or to roaming imps and grems. It was a good hole in the ground, with no remnants around. But this close to asshole HQ, Dao and David had to whisper.

Silence fell on them. At first, it was easy to chalk it up to needing to be quiet to avoid being found again, or that Daoka couldn't speak English. Or Estian, according to Jes. But it wasn't long before he

was looking down and away, as that annoying feeling crept up through his guts and into his brain. Shame.

“Sorry,” he said.

Daoka tilted her head slightly and clicked once. No need for a translator on that one.

“Because I froze.”

After couple more clicks, she shrugged slightly, smiling at him.

“Well, I mean, I never thought I’d be that guy who freezes. I suppose no one does, but I... guess I always thought I’d be able to respond quick when shit hits the fan like that. I could stab an imp, but when it’s... another person...” He pulled his knees up a bit so he could rest his elbows on them, and he let his head hang forward. “And it’s not just that. It’s... It’s...”

Daoka clicked quietly a few times. Before he knew it, she sat down beside him, shoulder to his, and she smiled as she looked down at the ground under their feet.

“I guess the reality is finally setting in. I thought it already had, but seeing a couple of... people, humans, looking like a couple raiders straight out of a Mad Max movie?” Sighing, he sat back and pushed his head against the stone behind him. “I’m in Hell, and the only reason I’m not dead is because of you two. And... I don’t know. I’m trying to process that.”

More clicks, followed by a gentle nudge of her elbow.

“I’m really in Hell. I’m really in Hell, and I can’t find my sister, and now every day and night my life is going to be at risk to demons and even other humans, all of whom want to rip out my heart and eat me. I’m wearing the clothes of a dead man, someone you killed, because if you didn’t he’d have killed Jes, you, and me. I’m relying on two sexy demons to keep me alive and hopefully save my sister, and I have no idea what to do if we even accomplish that. I hate not knowing what to do. I hate not knowing what the future’s gonna bring even more. I... fucking hate this...”

Dao clicked at him a couple times, a weird sound he hadn’t heard her make yet. High pitched but quiet, almost like a morning bird.

She leaned down toward him, rubbed her closer big ram horn against the side of his head, and reached out with her further arm. She ran the blunt side of a claw along the half of his chest not covered by armor, and again clicked a few times. As much as David knew he really sucked at reading people, and could never tell if a girl was flirting or not, Daoka was literally pressing up against him, rubbing on him, and tracing lines on his skin with her claws.

“I uh... oh... shit, I... said... t-two sexy demons, didn't I?” Ah shit he was stuttering. “I... I um... Sorry? I mean, I didn't mean—”

Daoka pulled away with a hiss and a couple hard clicks.

“Wait, wait. I mean, yes, you're very... sexy. Very, very...” The memory of Dao on her back, Jeskura eating her out, and the satyr playing with her huge breasts while looking at David came back like an ocean wave. Existential dread and terror about his horrible future, gone. The only thing in existence right now, was the deadly satyr woman and her eyeless gaze, looking at him, demanding he explain himself for taking back what he'd said. Something she'd apparently liked him saying. “You're extremely sexy.”

Daoka smiled, leaned back in, and licked her lips with a sharp-tipped tongue as her claw again traced lines around his chest, and his one exposed nipple.

“B-But, uh, aren't you... um... Jeskura?” The combination of shock and terror about a demon hitting on him, and fear of Jeskura ripping his legs off like she'd done to that Cainian woman, if she found him doing things with Daoka, was the only reason he didn't have a hard-on.

Daoka nodded, pointed at him with one hand, and somehow managed to make a shape with both hands that vaguely looked like two things squishing another thing between them. Or, two people, squishing a person between them.

He pulled his head back.

“I uh, I mean... um... uhh—”

“Bad news, fresh meat!”

Oh fuck oh fuck. He jumped up and held up his hands.

“I wasn't... I mean, we w-weren't—”

“Diogo's gone,” Jeskura said, snarling as she stomped down into their little ravine, wings partly spread. Her forward leaning posture made her look extremely intimidating, like a giant bird ready to pounce and eat him.

“What?”

“Diogo's gone. Zreeg says he up and left to take some unmarked girl to Zel.”

“Oh... Oh! Mia! She's alive!”

“Yeah, probably. But if she's on her way to Zel now, that means my plan's fucked.”



Jeskura went on, hands up in the air as she stomped about, complaining about how they couldn't ambush Diogo anymore. All white noise to David. Mia was alive. Alive! Oh thank fucking god.

"Diogo," Jes continued, "did what I knew he'd fucking do, but someone else took your sis to see him. So of course he's dragging her and his fat ass to see Zel and—David. David!" She hit him with her wing, and his eyes snapped up and open. "Pay attention!" So much for being quiet.

"Sorry, sorry. Just... I'm so happy."

"Yeah yeah. How nice for you. The fuck do I do!? We can't get ahead of Diogo now. I can't set up traps and—"

Daoka clicked, neutral and constant, interweaving with Jeskura's words. A conversation, with no way for David to infer what the satyr was saying. Tail cracks and fluttering wings, Jeskura was very animated when angry, and David made sure to stay out of the way. And made sure she couldn't see his smile.

"Fine. Fine! Ugh, pain in my ass." Jeskura marched on, tail cracking left and right against rocks. "Keep the clothes, David. You're gonna need them. Tomorrow we start the trek to the spire."

"Really? Thought maybe you'd want to go with the original plan, maybe set up an ambush for Diogo when he comes back."

"Maybe. Dangerous to be out in that area for that many days. And I don't know when he'll come back."

"Oh. So... to the spire, then. Um, how—"

"Four day trek from here, and Diogo's ahead of us by one day."

"He really went himself?" he asked.

"Welcome to Hell. People in charge do things themselves." She shrugged as she motioned back toward the path they'd taken, and started walking. "Politics."

"Politics? Like... seriously?"

"Yeap. You have to do shit face to face, or lose face, or more problematically, someone else comes along and ruins your shit. If Diogo didn't go, someone would take credit, or eat your sister, or who fucking knows what."

He frowned. "Mean."

Jes's frown disappeared as laughter bubbled through her. Somehow, for some reason, everything he said made her laugh. And considering how she reacted to learning her plan wouldn't work, it was clear she was normally an angry person. If making her laugh meant she kept him alive, he was perfectly happy to keep doing it.

"Let's head back, fresh meat. Rest up, and we can start tomorrow. It's a long walk."

Jeskura did things on the fly. If something went badly, she didn't plan ahead to fix it, she just responded and compensated and tried again with the closest option available. His exact opposite.

But, she was keeping him alive. And Daoka was more than interested in doing the same. And she'd flirted with him. Part of him screamed in his head to not think that, because the fuck did he know? She didn't even have eyes! Reading her facial expressions wasn't exactly easy.

Then again, she'd literally played with his chest, been offended when he'd tried to apologize for calling her sexy, and then made some person-on-person-on-person finger gestures. Hard to misinterpret that. And, that gesture included the third person, Jeskura, the sexy gargoyle who looked ready to pop and tear someone's head off.

They all froze when another shadow clipped across them.

No battle cry followed, or sudden leap, anything that'd make them move in response. Somehow he'd managed to summon the part of him that'd stabbed that imp, and he was ready to try something again, or at least dodge, but the shadow remained unmoving, until they all slowly turned and looked up at the rock.

A big demon woman perched on the rock, a small frown on her mostly human, slightly cat-like face. A couple of big black horns topped her head, with black hair tendrils dangling around her skull like Jeskura's. No wings, and she perched on raptor feet while she sat just like a cat or dog would, arms straight down in front of her and knees out to the sides, while her thick spiky tail stuck out to the side slightly, unmoving.

One of the tiger demons Jeskura had told him about. A tregeera. One with a scar on her face that left a dent in one of her horns.

"Caera," Jes said, growling quietly as she walked past David and put herself between him and the demon. "How'd you find us?"

"Zreeg's an idiot. He didn't betray you, if that's what you were wondering. Not on purpose."

"Yeah well, I'll happily take an idiot over a traitor."

“Plus, you’re loud.”

“Fuck you.”

There was some venom in Jes’s words. David took a step back. Whoever this tiger woman Caera was, she looked big and strong enough to take them all on at the same time, and David didn’t have so much as a sharp knife.

“What’re you doing here?” Caera asked.

“Like I’m telling you.”

The tiger snarled quietly as she pulled her tail around in front of her, and idly plucked away bits of rock stuck in the spikes that ran along its spine.

“You’re never going to be able to kill Diogo, Jes. And Dao, Tacitus isn’t going to forgive you until he’s got your head on a spike. Why are you two sticking your noses out?”

“I’m going to get Diogo, Caera,” Jes said. “It’ll happen, sooner or later. Besides, the fuck do you care? You want him dead, too.”

“I need him.”

“No you don’t. There are others ways to get those Cainites, and Diogo isn’t going to risk his neck for you.”

The tiger snarled, and slowly crawled down the huge rock and down into the small ravine with them, on all fours. Holy shit she was huge, bigger than a Siberian tiger, bigger than Jes. And of course his dumb brain immediately told him she was hot, too, despite the wider mouth filled with sharp teeth. Maybe because of, considering how twisted he evidently was.

“Is this a—”

“No, David’s not a Cainite.” Jeskura blocked him off with one of her wings. “Just a fresh meat I’m keeping for myself.”

“I don’t believe that for a second. He—” Caera frowned as she looked past the top of Jes’s wing, straight at David. Slowly, her expression softened, and she tilted her head to the side as she watched him. “... oh. You too.”

“Too?” David asked. “You... You saw...”

“You look just like her. Unmarked and everything.” Body visibly relaxing, muscles unclenching, the big tiger woman stood up on her hind legs. Yeap, she was huge, eight feet tall and wearing the same armor Jes and Dao wore.

“You talked to Mia?”

“Guarded her for the night. Stupidly nice girl, really doesn’t belong in Hell.”

Jes sighed as she lowered her wing. “Yeah, this one, too. Mia’s his sister.”

Caera grinned as she came in closer, and Jes and Dao both took small steps back, Jes’s wing still out so it pushed David back too. They were afraid of her.

“And you were bringing him to Diogo, because...”

“Guess.”

The tiger chuckled. “Because you were hoping Diogo would let his guard down so you could kill him.”

“Good guess.”

Nodding, the tiger looked at David, watching him with a strange curiosity, as if she’d seen him before.

“Two unmarked in two days. And... the same... feeling, around them.”

“Feeling?” David and Jes asked.

“Feeling. Can’t quite say what it is, but it stopped when Mia left, and now I’m feeling it again.” She pointed at claw at him. “It’s coming from you.”

“Me?” Uh oh. He took another step back, and almost jumped when Daoka put a hand on his shoulder. “I don’t know anything—”

“Yes yes, I know. Mia didn’t know anything either. She also didn’t mention you.”

“She... didn’t?”

“Afraid an asshole like Diogo would go out looking for you, no doubt.”

That, was smart. David had reason to trust Jes and Dao, but even then, it was kinda stupid for him to bring up Mia so readily.

“I get the tinglies, yeah,” Jes said. “You’re sure it’s these unmarked pipsqueaks?”

“I am,” Caera said. “It won’t be long before Diogo figures it out. And I’m sure Zel will figure it out quick.”

“Yeah, she probably will. She’s a smart bitch.”

Daoka pushed David back, and unleashed a fury of clicks as she hopped up to Caera, and jammed a finger up at the much larger demon’s chest armor.

Laughing, Caera put up her hands like she was surrendering. “I’m not gonna hurt your pet, riiva, calm down.”

Daoka didn’t sound convinced from the way her clicks continued. But after a few seconds she backed off and rejoined David, standing in front of him.

“So, you gonna tell Diogo?” Jes asked.

“Nah. You were right. I want the devorjin dead, too.”

“Funny way of working toward that goal, becoming his right hand bitch.”

Sighing, Caera shook her head as she lowered herself onto all fours again, and prowled toward them before sitting again. Big, giant, tiger lady.

“I didn’t come out here to start a fight, Jes. I came out here because I wanted to check up on you and Daoka, and maybe warn you things are happening. I’m sure you’ve seen the angels.”

“I have.”

“And now we’ve both seen an unmarked. When Mia gets to Zel, it won’t be long before word spreads. Things will get... problematic.”

The gargoyle grumbled, hooked her wings to her back again, and paced, eyes pointed at the ground. Not in defense mode anymore, then. David took a breath, but kept his eyes on the treegera, and the massive claws she had. He did a double take on her hands, too. Five fingers and one thumb, interesting.

“I didn’t think it’d be a problem,” Jes said, “if it was just this fresh meat. Dao is convinced he’ll make a good pet for her, so I figured we’d just keep him. No need for all of Hell to know about him. But you’re right, if Zel finds out, she’ll make sure everyone knows, if she thinks it’ll give her bargaining power or what-the-fuck ever. Diogo definitely does.”

“Caera,” David said, voice trembling a little more than he wanted it too.

The tiger lady smiled at him. Sitting like she was, they were basically eye level.

“Yeah?”

“Can you... help us, rescue my sister?”

Caera stared at him, blinking.

“She isn’t going to help you,” Jes said, rolling her eyes. “David, come on, the fuck have I been saying all this time? This is Hell. Everyone’s an asshole. No one’s just going to help you—”

The tiger lady chuckled, and unless he was going insane — possible — she gave him a wink.

“I’ll help.”