~~David~~

David and the three demons walked alongside a mountain cliff face, rock on their right and a steep drop into the red river on their left. Caera walked with David on all fours, Daoka behind them, Jeskura ahead. The path had taken them higher and higher, until a good few hundred meters of falling waited for anyone who stepped in the wrong spot, either by rolling down the mountain, or straight into one of the many ravines. But at least there weren’t any flying, er, gliding demons this high up, and the chances they’d stumble onto hunting demons, or humans, this high up was low as well.

He had a giant penis.

He grinned to himself. Every time the memory came up, he wanted to laugh, and he had to fight to keep it down. Of all the weird things to happen to him in the past few days, getting sent to Hell was horrible, and getting a giant penis was awesome. What the fuck?

“Last time I walked a path like this,” Caera said, “three years ago, I stumbled onto a gorujin.”

“What do they look like?” he asked.

“One of the tetrad, so, big. Must have been ten feet tall at least, with two giant wings. Four huge horns and a long tail. Big sword.”

That did sound pretty awesome. Scary, but awesome.

“Do demons usually use weapons?”

“Not usually. Hard to use them without practice, when you have wings and spikes and claws getting in the way. And they lack the satisfaction of grabbing flesh with your own hands and ripping it apart.”

He blinked down at the prowling tiger woman, and she grinned up at him.

“You’re scaring me.”

“Good. I’m playing nice, but make no mistake, demons love violence. We love the sensation of skin and muscle tearing apart, and bones breaking under our grip. Even Daoka loves it.”

David looked back, and Daoka clicked softly at him as she smiled. But she did nod after a couple seconds, hopped in closer, and pat his head once.

“It’s still a lot better than I figured demons would be,” he said, smiling at the satyr. “I mean, not that I expected demons to actually exist, but, yeah. Much better.”

Daoka’s grin brightened, and she rubbed the back of his head with the side of her curling horns, before getting back into position.

“The gorujin was skinning another tregeera’s skull at the time,” Caera said. “If I had to guess, the gorujin was Romakus.”

“Romakus?”

“He’s been making trouble for the spires this side of Hell. Probably a member of the Damall.”

“Damall?”

Caera laughed. “You were right, Jes.”

“Told you,” Jes said between chuckles. “Dude just can’t stop.”

Hearing a demon say ‘dude’ was never going to sound normal.

“The Damall,” Caera continued, “is a group of troublemakers. When one spire gets uppity and tries to spread its borders, the Damall have a habit of showing up and giving them a hard time.”

“That… is a strange goal for an organization. They do this for all the spires?”

“Yes.”

“Weird.”

“Yes.”

“Okay, next question. You want help killing the Cainites. Who are they?”

It took her a second to answer. Sensitive topic, or he was asking too many questions. Both, probably.

“Humans who are devoted to Cain.”

“Devoted to Cain? So not exactly real Cainites then, from human history?”

“I’m not sure. Cain was a real person,” Caera said. “Died tens of thousands of years ago.”

“On the surface?”

“Well, yes, but also in Hell. I don’t have any of the details, no one does, but back then he managed to stir enough humans and demons to his cause, he prepared to assault Heaven. Cain’s War.”

He stared down at the tiger woman. A human did that?

“I’m sorry, what?”

Caera managed a shrug. “Your guess is as good as mine. It’s not written anywhere how he accomplished any of the shit he did, but he did some amazing shit. He had all eight spires working for him, and he’d taken False Gate for himself. His plan was to use the vortex, but how, no one knows.”

“And the Cainites down here worship him?”

It’d probably forever eat at him that they called them that, when they weren’t actually Cainites or Cainians. What little he knew about the real sect was that they didn’t actually worship Cain, but considered him important to their views, and they had a lot of gnostic beliefs. But, whatever, roll with it.

“Sort of. They think Cain had the right idea about one particular thing.”

“Yeah?”

“Humans can ascend and become stronger than they are by eating demons… and angels.”

“Angels too? What the fuck? Does eating a demon even have a benefit?”

“Far as I know, no,” Caera said. “Humans do occasionally kill a demon and eat them, but I haven’t seen any humans get stronger for it.”

“Me neither,” Jes said. “Just a full belly.”

Daoka clicked twice.

“But an angel,” Caera said, “that I don’t know. No one’s eaten an angel. At least, I don’t think so. Any demons who did died ages ago, and I haven’t found anything written about them, either.”

He nodded as he looked down, stroked his chin, and watched his toes find grooves in the rocks to walk on. So, Hell had its own organizations, like rebel groups, and raiders, and cultists, and probably other things. And—

“Eight spires?” he asked.

“What?”

“You said Cain got eight spires? You mentioned earlier about the Nine Spires War?”

Caera smiled. “You paid attention.”

“He’s the brainy type,” Jes said. “Another reason we’re keeping him around.”

“The ninth spire,” Caera said. “The forgotten spire, in the Forgotten Place. Middle of Hell, an island in that sea. No one goes there anymore.”

“No one?”

“No one. The sea can’t be crossed.”

“Just… can’t be crossed?”

“Can’t be crossed. If you ever get near the inner shore, you’ll see why.”

He frowned as he looked down again. That was a shitty answer, but Caera was already answering many of his questions, and if she thought that answer was good one, it must have been.

“Sounds like an important place. Too important to be forgotten.”

“Yes. Ironic, right?”

“So there’s eight spires in use, then? Eight rulers?”

“Yes. Zelandariel rules Death’s Grip. Clockwise, the Grave Valley is ruled by Azailia. Counter-clockwise, Alessio rules the Black Valley.”

“Grave Valley and Black Valley? Sounds like we’re surrounded by a necromancer’s wet dream.” Oh shit. “That… That isn’t a thing, right? Necromancers?”

“Fuck me I hope not,” Jes said. “Zombies are scary.”

“Damn scary,” Caera said, nodding, as if what she said made perfect sense and wasn’t the most ridiculous thing David had ever heard.

“You guys know you’re demons, right? Super strong? Lift big rocks and tear people apart like they’re made of tissue paper?”

Daoka hopped in closer and unleashed a flurry of clicks. Hand gestures included running, chasing, and something that looked like falling and being swarmed.

“Daoka’s right,” Caera said. “A few billion human corpses, with probably no resonance to eat, walking after every demon, endless? That’s horrifying!”

He threw up his hands. This place was crazy. These ladies were crazy.

“How about Jesus?” he asked. “Did he exist?”

“I’ve never found runes talking about him,” Caera said. “Why would someone like that be in Hell?”

“Touché. I—”

The mountains broke away, a valley opening between them as the path rounded the corner of the cliff. Hell, was massive. The mountains were massive, and some of them were two, maybe three times as tall as the one they were only maybe a third of the way up now, but in front of them it all opened up and pulled apart. No mountains blocked his view, at all, and while the hazy heat of Hell warped everything, he could see, and see, and see.

Hell, was flat. It didn’t have a horizon. Past the valley and the enormous spire structure inside it, the valley didn’t come up high enough to block his vision of what lay beyond. Something black, and long. The Black Valley. To his left was the inner sea, but he couldn’t see it with mountains in the way. To his right was the ocean that surrounded the big donut of Hell, but he couldn’t see that either with more mountains in the way. But facing counter-clockwise, he could see all the way through Death’s Grip, kilometers upon kilometers away, hundreds, maybe a thousand or two, to where its outer edge touched the outer ocean in the distance. The heat blurred it all. But it was endless, and somewhere in the distance the surface of Hell and the burning sky merged.

There was no horizon. The distance went on and on and blended in a seam, like a weird painting your eyes got lost in.

For the first time in his life, vertigo hit him, and he snapped his hand out to catch his weight against the cliff wall. Away from the death fall, thankfully.

Daoka hopped up behind him and helped stand him straight, clicking away like a worried hen.

“I’m fine. I… I just, didn’t realize how… strange that would look.”

“Strange for you,” Jes said, chuckling. “I don’t understand how people on the surface can stand living on a big rock ball floating around in endless nothingness. That doesn’t make you sick?”

He couldn’t help but laugh a little at that. Laughter was good. It helped settle his heart rate he didn’t notice spiking.

“It did get a little overwhelming thinking about it sometimes,” he said. “Just, a big ball of rock, pulling us down with gravity, floating around in a big emptiness. Here, it’s… it’s not that, is it? It’s almost like, it’s more solid than the surface world, in a strange way.” The opposite of the floating islands of Heaven.

“Hell is the bottom of the Great Tower,” Caera said. “It makes sense it feels more anchored.”

Finally, more Q and A.

“What is the Great Tower?”

“No one knows.”

Fuck.

“Really?”

Caera nodded, and prowled ahead. He jogged after her.

“It’s an old term that gets thrown around, but no one knows what it means. Maybe the angels do, but down here, all anyone knows is the Great Tower, sometimes called the Forlorn Tower, has three levels. Hell, the surface, and Heaven.”

“Forlorn…”

“Like I said,” Jes said, “if God or whoever was ever around, they aren’t anymore. Fucker fucked up and left us.” The gargoyle flapped her wings, jumped ahead, and resumed leading their little group along the high mountain path.

“I can’t believe that,” David said. “He, or they, couldn’t have just left. You don’t go creating universes and then just leave them. Right?”

Daoka clicked a few times, lower pitched than usual. She didn’t sound convinced.

“Whatever happened,” Caera said, “it happened fucking ages ago, long before Cain’s War. I haven’t found a single rune that’s ever referenced even another rune referencing on when God left or where they went. But they’re gone, that’s for sure. Gone, or happy to hide and do fuck all.”

That was damn depressing, but also, an interesting mystery. Judging from what the demons were saying, the fact God existed was taken as a given. But was it? Hell apparently wanted people with ‘evil’ resonance, and Heaven wanted people who had ‘good’ resonance, but that didn’t necessarily prove God existed, just that humans, demons, and angels existed on planes that had their own ecosystem. For all he knew, the Great Tower could have been created from the big bang, or some equivalent.

Then again, he was trying to rationalize that God might not exist, while in Hell.

“So, the Great Tower,” he said. “Jes said I might only have to die once to go back to it? Because I don’t have a mark?”

“She means going back to it so it can spit you back out again. I haven’t found a rune about it, but it does seem what most demons assume happens. Your deaths in Hell cleanse you, and then you go to the Great Tower, clean and ready for another round. Or maybe you get broken down and used as fuel for a new wave of souls.”

Another point for the ecosystem theory.

“So souls are like fertilizer for new souls?”

Caera shrugged. “No one knows, David. At least not down here. Maybe the angels know more, but down here, all we have are old runes that most demons don’t even know how to read anymore. Very old forms of Estian, and some runes I don’t even recognize.”

“Estian, the language we’re all speaking right now.”

Doaka clicked once.

“Sorry. Except Daoka.” He smiled back at the satyr, and she returned it.

“Yes,” Caera said. “Everyone understands it, but like surface languages it has a nasty habit of evolving over centuries.”

“Problematic.”

The tiger demon grinned up at him. “Very.”

He returned the grin. She liked the way he talked. He liked the way she talked. It was nice talking to a demon who cared about things like details, or the past, someone who wanted to figure out how things worked, and why.

Plus, she was beautiful. She had a slender-ish sort of face, like Daoka, but he could see a little more age there, maturity, like a milf. Or, cougar. A tiger cougar. He forced himself to not laugh. And unlike Daoka, who had slender, small lips, Caera’s mouth was wide, and every time she spoke he could see her many, many sharp teeth, like a cross between a shark’s and crocodile’s.

“Jeskura,” he said. “She said I could see the vortex if we got high enough.”

“We’re not nearly high enough for that.”

“Damn.”

“And from this far it’s just a tiny vertical line in the distance.”

“Damn damn.”

Caera laughed. “All these questions about Hell. I figured you’d be more interested in trying to figure out why you’re special.”

“I am. I need details about how everything works, so I can put together the infrastructure in my head. Turn the black box into a white box. Once I understand why things do what they do, and then what they’d do if certain variables were changed, I can deduce what’s going on with me and Mia. The more information I have, the more…”

Jeskura stopped and stared at him. Daoka stared at him, in her own way. Caera stared up at him, eyebrow raised.

He groaned. “Just, keep giving me information and eventually I’ll be able to figure out what’s going on. Hopefully.”

“He’s one of those thinker types,” Jes said, rolling her eyes before resuming down the path. “Gonna bore me to death.”

“Thinker types have a habit of dying quick down here,” Caera said. “You don’t respond fast enough when shit hits the fan.”

He winced. Like when he hadn’t helped Jes and Dao with the humans.

“But,” Caera continued, “I’ll do what I can to keep you alive, and deal with Diogo. Then I’ll have two unmarked with me when I get those Cainian sheep. And from there, we—”

Daoka clicked several times, loud and rapidfire.

“Yes yes we can figure out what to do about Tacitus, too. Either way, I want to see what happens with these unmarked. I definitely want to see why you have this strange… large aura, that gives us a tingling sensation.”

“It changes a lot when he’s horny,” Jes said. “Like… from being around a gentle breeze, to a getting swept up in a fucking tornado.”

“You guys get tornadoes down here?”

“Sometimes,” Caera said. “Rare, but they happen. Deadly. Lots of fire.”

“Scary.”

Daoka clicked once. She thought so, too.

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As much as part of him was looking forward to experiencing last night again, lots of sex with his new awesome amazing best-thing-ever giant penis, the trek took them up higher, and by the time the fire sky dimmed and the amber veins in the rocks softened, they were exhausted. Strong as demons were compared to humans, they tired just as easily. More easily, maybe.

They found a vertical crevice in the mountain wall, and slipped inside. Before he knew it, he collapsed on his ass, and let out a long groan.

“I keep expecting to get hungry,” he said. “I mean, if I don’t need to eat except to heal injuries, which makes no sense by the way, then why do I get tired? Where’s the line between injury and exhaustion, biologically speaking?”

Jes sat across from him, the crevice meaning their legs touched and passed each other, and she rolled her eyes.

“This kid, I swear. Just accept it and adapt.”

Daoka clicked a few times as she sat down, with him, not Jes, which earned another eye roll from the gargoyle. Chuckling, Dao gave Jes a playful grin, and snuggled into David’s side. She rubbed her closest horn against the top of his head, and put a quick kiss on his ear. Okay, maybe he wasn’t too exhausted?

Caera slumped down on the ground, flat out on her stomach with arms and legs splayed out, like a cat, or maybe a dog, giving in to total exhaustion. Thankfully she did it at the entrance of the crevice ten feet away, or her claws would have slammed right into the side of Dao’s legs.

“Hell is a reflection of the surface,” Caera said. “How that works, I don’t know. But Hell changes as the surface changes, and it warps the rules. Sleep when you’re tired, but being tired doesn’t drain essence. Not in humans, at least. Demons burn through their essence pretty quick, and we burn through resonance replenishing it. At this rate, I’ll need to eat in a day or two.”

Hell was a reflection of the physical world? Which meant, the surface world was ground zero, the starting point? Did Heaven work the same way as Hell? How did any of that fit into the Great Tower idea?

Caera didn’t know the answers, so he didn’t ask. She knew a lot, and a lot wasn’t enough.

“Resonance and essence,” he said. “Anything I should know about them?”

The tiger lady managed a weak shrug. “Not really. I assume Jes and Dao already told you how the basics work?”

“Mhmm. But I don’t really get… like… how resonance works. Why do humans have it? What is it?”

“We don’t know. Everything I know about resonance is just repeated word of mouth. Humans are probably born with resonance, and alter it during life. It’s the measure of how good or bad a person you were. If you’re more bad than good, you come to Hell, and die, and die, and die, until the last bit of the bad resonance is wiped away. Supposedly.”

“The numbers on people’s foreheads represents how bad they were.”

“Exactly. But having a higher number doesn’t mean you have more resonance, just that what you have is more tainted, and tastier.” She managed a weak grin. “It takes longer and longer to correct, so you have to die more.”

He shivered, remembering how awful remnants had it. At least it wasn’t eternal torture, but being used as mortar in a wall of stones, bleeding and screaming, for who knew how many days, or years, only to have to do it again and again? Fucking terrifying.

“Hell is wiping people clean before sending them to the Great Tower, to get reborn, or turned into fertilizer for new souls? Why?”

Another shrug.

“You know all we know, now. You’re asking the big questions most demons just don’t care about, and we couldn’t answer even if we did. I’ve spent a hundred years digging through ruins and old tunnels. I’ve been all the way to Angel’s Spine, and I’ve seen the edge of The Red Pits. I’ve never, ever found any sort of explanation for why God set things up the way they did, David. They just did.”

The most infuriating answer. ‘Because’. But it wasn’t her fault, so he sighed and groaned a little, leaned back against the wall, and closed his eyes.

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~~Day 19~~

~~Mia~~

It happened again.

Instead of waking up to the quiet chirping of her smartphone bird alarm, her LED lights slowly turning on, and the dread of having to go to morning classes, she woke up to a sky of embers growing into flames, and she was surrounded by grunts and moans.

Day three of their trek. One more night and they’d arrive at the spire late tomorrow, according to Scilra. Mia had no idea how to feel about that, or how she felt waking up to an orgy, again.

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Adron and Hannah were only a few feet away, quietly fucking, Hannah lying on Adron’s chest on her back. The angle really pushed the bulge on her stomach up and out, turning it from subtle to blatant. And because Mia was a moron, she lifted her head enough to get a look down and along Hannah’s gorgeous naked body, and down between her legs. Adron wasn’t in her slit. The angle hid it from view, but seeing Hannah squirm and pant in bliss as Adron fucked her ass, sent more tingles through Mia’s body.

It only got worse as she looked out to the rest of the demons. Every single one of them was having sex.

The other vrat was in a similar position with one of the human men, fucking his ass while the man lay on him, back to his chest. And on top of him, one of the tregeera fucked the man from on top, sandwiching him between their huge bodies. Mia stared. For some reason she hadn’t even considered that the vrat might be into men. Silly her, apparently.

Loria enjoyed a similar sandwich with the other human man, and the ridiculously gorgeous incubus. The other tregeera enjoyed her own sandwich between two brutes, one fucking her from behind with an arm wrapped around her huge tail, while the tiger woman somehow managed to open her mouth wide enough to take the other brute’s length down her throat. Her neck bulged, and Mia didn’t even want to think about deep she took him.

But most surprisingly, Diogo sat nearby. Really nearby. At some point in the night, he’d come and sat beside Mia, a whole eight feet away from her, half facing her. His legs were spread, ass to the ground, and he had a hand around the succubus’s waist. The juggernaut’s massive grip was big enough to completely circle the sex demon’s slender waist with one hand.

He was masturbating with her body, holding her so she faced him, angled away so he could casually work her up and down his length with a lazy pace. With Diogo mostly facing Mia, she got to see a lot more than she bargained for. His massive testicles, dripping with juices and cum. The succubus, arms and legs limp, hand hanging back limp as well, absolutely zero effort from her to fuck the brute back as he slowly sank… holy fuck that must have been a foot and a half of length into the sex demon. And he made sure to sink her balls deep with each stroke, until the bulge on her belly reached high enough it nestled between her spread, hanging, heavy breasts.

But no one touched Mia.

“I… I um…”

The succubus managed to open her eyes long enough to look at Mia, head dangling upside down, and the hunger in them struck her frozen. Even before, when the succubus looked at her with ‘I want to fuck you’ eyes, they didn’t look like this. She looked almost psycho mesmerized. If it wasn’t for the massive hulking brute holding her and masturbating with her body, no doubt the succubus would have jumped Mia right there.

“Be happy you are considered off limits,” Diogo said, eyes set on her, even as he continued to slowly lift and sink the succubus on his cock. “Something in the air… demands our satisfaction.”

“Satisfaction? I—”

Hannah let out a squeak as Adron rolled over, and nudged his hip into Mia’s side as he got on top of Hannah. He knelt up, grabbed his slave by the shoulders, and pinned her on his length as he pulled her up to hold horizontal over the ground at waist height. His right hand slid down, grabbed her waist, and kept her pinned while his other should held her shoulder and stopped her from collapsing. Her knees hung a few inches above the ground, and her arms dangled, fingers dragging over the stones, as Adron fucked her. Hard. Hard enough her small breasts rippled underneath her, and her arms swung back and forth.

Like the succubus, Hannah made no attempt to fuck him back. All she did, was groan, and cum. Mia stared at her, the single drop of drool that fell from her mouth, and then looked along under her to her legs, and the juices she soaked Adron’s testicles with. They slapped against her empty pussy with each thrust, splashing the girl’s juices, and Adron’s cum, against her thighs.

Mia forced herself to look away, back to Diogo, and then back to the others. They all had a strange look in their eyes, like as if the only thing that mattered in all life anymore, was getting off. Adron looked down at his slave like he was going to eat her, but then he also gave Mia the same eyes. And, as he looked at Mia, eyes roaming her naked body, he fucked the dangling Hannah faster, and harder.

They all got faster. Many looked to Mia, licking their lips and devouring her with their eyes, while they fucked each other. And they kept doing it, consuming her with their red and black gaze. And sometimes, their green and blue and brown eyes, the humans seemingly as interested in her as the others.

Diogo stopped being so gentle with his succubus. He turned the girl over, and her arms and legs dangled underneath her same as Hannah, swaying with each hard pull as the juggernaut continued to masturbate with her body. Not fucking, he made no thrusts. He bounced the curvy creature on his cock hard, and where the woman had obviously been trying to keep quiet before, now she broke into loud moan and squeaks, her sultry voice breaking into girlish mewls. Her enormous breasts flowed back and forth, almost slapping her chest and chin with each bounce, and her mouth hung open, tip of her tongue just barely visible hanging out of it. Each harsh yank Diogo forced on her, sinking her balls deep onto his titanic cock, forced a squirt of her juices to gush over his testicles, soon joined by waves of his own cum.

The distension on the succubus’s belly was absurd, her swaying breasts bumping up against the bulge reaching her sternum. It only grew, as Diogo pumped her full of cum. A giant demon, enjoying his toy, while looking at Mia.

Mia stared.

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Then they finished. Mia sat there, skin tingling, body boiling, and watched as the demons ended yet another orgy. Demons with cocks stood up, and let the huge things dangle with their weight, dripping with cum. Of course she took another peek at the other vrat, fucking the man in the ass, and she gulped as she watched the demon’s long length slip free of the man. But of course when Adron did the same with Hannah, Mia stared at that even harder. It was only three feet away, and Hannah’s whimpers sounded all too similar to the kind Mia made when she’d cum too many times, and was having trouble recovering, but times a hundred. Adron’s length came free of her ass, and the girl rolled onto her side, panting, exhausted. Smiling.

Diogo pulled the trembling succubus off his length, and set her down beside Mia, only a few feet away. The tall, busty creature lay on her back, legs slightly spread, and she quivered as the bulge on her belly disappeared as waves of thick cum poured out of her slit. How did someone, even a demon, take something that deep, and not get a punctured diaphragm? However it worked, the succubus had cum her brains out.

The group spent the next ten minutes recovering. Panting, some minor groaning and moaning, and a few attempts to wipe off some of the more ridiculous pools of cum dripping from their bodies. Hell sucked up the globs of white and the juices the girls had coated the many cocks with, like a desert sucks up water, especially as their bodies hardened, penises disappearing, vaginas closing, and breasts hardening. It wasn’t long before only traces remained of the mess they’d made.

And then like nothing happened, they all got up, and put on their armor. They didn’t care about any remaining stickiness on their thighs. Hell’s warm breeze would probably suck that up soon, too.

“It lingers,” the succubus said, back up on her feet and in her chest and waist wrap. “I can’t scratch it. I’m going to go insane at this rate.”

“Likewise,” Adron said. “You’re sure it’s not the girl?”

“Humans don’t have auras.” The tall demon woman leaned in toward Mia, close enough to almost kiss her, and eyed her up and down a couple times.

The vrat walked up next to the succubus, and pulled her away gently, hand on her shoulder.

“They always have marks, though,” Adron said. “This one’s different.”

“The ones in Heaven have no marks, no?” The succubus shrugged, eyed Mia up and down one more time, and walked away, skinny tail swaying left and right opposite of her exaggerated hip sway.

The succubus was envious. Whatever was making the demons uncontrollably horny, it wasn’t something the succubus was capable of. And despite what she said, she thought it might have been Mia’s doing, with the way she’d looked at her.

Mia forced herself to not smile. It wouldn’t be good if they thought she was behind it. She was pretty sure she wasn’t, but then again, there was something… vibrating, inside her. She felt it resonate more and more watching the demons fuck, when they’d all pushed themselves to finish their orgy. And then it’d quieted, as if satisfied.

Quieted, but not completely gone, so subtle she wouldn’t have noticed it if they hadn’t been talking about it.

Maybe she was responsible? Maybe… maybe… No, that made no sense. Someone screwed up and now she was in Hell when she should be in Heaven, but that was it. There was no reason for this weird tingly thing to be coming from her. Maybe they were all feeling the same tinglies she was, and it felt like this for all of them?

Then, why did it feel like it started inside her, and went outward?

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Back on the road again. She came up beside Adron, closer to the back of group.

“Adron,” she said, managing a weak smile up at him before nodding to Hannah beside him.

“Yeah?”

“I—”

“She liked what she saw,” Hannah said, grinning at her.

Mia blushed from head to toe. Curse of being ginger, pale skin that turned her body red if she so much as got slightly embarrassed.

“That’s, um, not what I wanted to—”

“You think, Hannah?” Adron asked. “I don’t know. I think she was picturing herself with Diogo.”

“I’m sure she was. But I bet she thinks a night with you would make for a better first time in Hell, than trying to fit someone like Diogo inside her.”

Adron nodded, smiling down at Mia as he scratched one of his horns.

“A shame Diogo says we’re not allowed to touch you.”

“A shame,” Hannah said, grinning at Mia from around Adron. “She’s so petite. I can imagine it, her underneath you, trapped, hands pinned under yours, squirming and wriggling and trying to escape as you slowly sink your cock into her until she thinks she’s about to burst.”

They both grinned at her, and they both licked their lips.

Mia squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head. Don’t think about it don’t think about it.

“Is everyone always so horny?” she asked.

“Nope,” Adron said. “The others are right. There’s something in the air, and it’s riling everyone up. I think it might be coming from you, but it’s pretty clear you don’t have any idea what’s going on, anymore than we do.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t get me wrong, we fuck all the time. Just normally we can resist for a four-day trek, usually.”

“Usually,” Hannah said with an affirming nod.

“I wanted to ask about how I managed to sleep through all that noise both nights.”

Adron chuckled. “We weren’t fucking in the middle of the night, just the end of it. Well, maybe some of us did, though whoever did made damn sure to stay quiet, and we all stayed quiet until rekindling. No one wants hellbeasts finding us while we’re asleep, or when it’s dark.”

“Makes sense.”

“And,” Hannah said, grinning at Mia again, “Diogo made sure to sit closer to you, to make sure no one touched you. Protecting his prize.”

She gulped, and did her best to not think about the busty succubus the titan had masturbated with, so close Mia could have reached out and touched his leg. Him and the other brutes really weren’t Mia’s type, with their ridiculously muscular bodies. Adron had a leanness to him that made him much more attractive, plus plenty of muscle, and more than a masculine shape to him and his shoulders.

But, then again, there was something about those brute juggernauts, something about their sheer size and titanic strength, that sent tingles through Mia, too. Something about how they could just… hold her, like a toy, like Diogo had with the succubus, and—

She squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head again. The fuck was happening to her? Stop it.

“I guess I’m glad he did,” she said.

Hannah laughed. “Are you? You really look like you need to get laid.”

Groaning, Mia looked down, and did her best to ignore her heartbeat in her cheeks.

“I really need to get out of Hell, is what I need.”

“Good luck with that,” Adron said, and he poked her side with his long tail. “Zel is a lot of things, but charitable? Never. She’ll use you in whatever way she can to get power.”

“Ugh.”

“But, Zel isn’t so bad, really. As long as you’re useful to her, she’ll treat you right.”

“And if I’m not, she’ll eat me.”

He shrugged. “You could always seduce her with this weird aura of yours that’s got Zalria annoyed.”

“I don’t have an aura! I… don’t think I have an aura?”

The vrat laughed, and poked her naked side with his tail again. “Even Hannah can feel it, but it’s definitely unusual. Saying it’s coming from you is kinda like saying windmills make wind.”

“How do you know about windmills? The scrying pools?”

“Yeap. Not like demons can spend every moment of every day hunting.”

For some reason, she laughed.

“I think most people on the, uh, surface, think demons do exactly that. Hunt, and torture, all day every day.”

“Yeap, we get that a lot.”

“And scrying pools. How do they work? Caera mentioned seeing real tigers in them.”

“They let you—hey, did you want to see one? I think there’s one ahead, near where we’ll probably sleep for the night. I can show you one then.”

“How can you tell? It’s just… rocks. Lots of rocks.”

He laughed, shrugging casually, as if trekking across the mountains of Hell, risking life and death, was a normal thing for him. And it didn’t seem like an act. Mia had met plenty of guys in university who put on that front, who pretended nothing bothered them. They weren’t hard to see through. Adron had a strange confidence and easygoing nature to him that felt real, and contagious. It was easy to see why Hannah liked him.

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A big valley spread out in front of them, running between two mountains. Lots of flat ground, maybe a half kilometer wide, and a dozen long. Instead of sharp drops, the mountains smoothed out where they met it, almost inviting people to walk down the easier path into its embrace.

So of course they didn’t do that. They stuck to one mountainside and walked a flat-ish path high up on the angled surface. One wrong step and she’d roll down the hill, break every bone in her body, and slide into the valley for the hellbeasts to eat. And there were a lot of them in the valley.

“What kind of hellbeast is that?” she asked.

“Goorts,” Adron said. He walked beside her on Diogo’s orders to catch her if she fell. She was happy he did.

“Goorts. Like, the goort leather I keep hearing about?”

He nodded, and plucked at one of the leather straps binding a slab of bent black metal to his bicep. It was dark red brown, leathery, but also dull to the point it was almost gray.

The creatures down below moved as a pack, maybe a hundred of them, distant enough they weren’t much more than blurs. But as Mia walked the edge of the path, nothing but a slope to her right, the path reached out to the side, and become a sharp cliff. And from its edge, she managed to spot a few of the goorts close enough she could make out their shapes.

Horses, with horns. First thought, unicorn, except they had two black horns that curled back from their heads like ram horns. So, big rams, except with the leanness and muscularity of horses. Big, strong horses, like cart horses.

“What do they eat?” she asked.

“Mostly humans,” Hannah said, a few feet behind her. “They’ll eat anything alive, though, even other hellbeasts.”

“They… eat human hearts?” Imagining a huge, muscular horse with giant ram horns, munching on human flesh with sharp teeth, was all sorts of freaky.

Adron shook his head. “They do, but they don’t survive on resonance. They eat essence, the same way you and Hannah do.” That explained why they’d eat other hellbeasts then.

“Really? I’m the same as a hellbeast?”

He laughed. “Nah. Hellbeasts don’t have resonance.”

“Oh. No resonance. Does… Does that mean surface animals don’t have resonance, either? Only humans?”

“How would we know? You see any surface animals around here?”

“No, I guess I don’t.” Was resonance required for animals to go to the afterlife? Did all dogs… not go to Heaven? Perish the thought. “Goorts. You kill them for their leather?”

“Yeap. Half the time it’s in self defense, since they have a nasty habit of raging and attacking anything nearby that isn’t another goort. But sometimes, if you’re lucky, you can raise one.”

“Raise?”

“Find a goort egg, raise it, and you’ve got yourself a nice batch of leather, once you kill and skin it. Or a powerful mount, if you’re lucky enough it doesn’t try and eat you.”

At first that put a frown on Mia’s face, and then a smile. It was a nice image, strange as it was, hatching a horse from an egg and raising it to be a pet and mount. A future goal, maybe? It’d certainly be easier to find David if she had a mount to ride. Assuming it wouldn’t grow up to eat her.

“Why an egg?” she asked.

“Why not?”

“I mean, uh… you know, mammals don’t normally lay eggs? Some exceptions aside?”

Adron grinned down at her. “No one down here is a mammal. No one down here is giving birth, anyway.”

“Really? I… what?”

“Zel will show you, if you ask her nicely, and she’s willing to play your questions game.”

“I—”

Pebbles rolled down the hill, from above. Adron shoved her against the wall, away from the valley, and the world went white. Thunk, head, stone. She sat down on the ground of the path, leaned back against the wall, and clutched her head as she looked up.

Adron wasn’t there anymore.

“Shit!” Hannah looked down over the path edge, and the drop to the slope below of the mountain. The slope that led into the valley of goorts.

Mia put a hand against the wall and forced herself up. Pain, but not major pain, sharp and surface level only.

“What happened?”

“A fucking basilisk!”

“W-What?” Once the world stopped turning, Mia walked up to Hannah’s side, and looked down the slope.

Adron half rolled, half ran, falling to his back every so often before gravity yanked his feet back down, and he managed another thirty or forty feet of running down the slope before falling again. He probably could have run down the slope, recovered, and climbed back up it, but something else was on top of him, rolling with him. Something long, huge, and reptile-like.

“Shit shit shit.” Hannah rubbed her hands together, and stared down the slope, dread etched in her face. “Diogo! Scilra!”

Down the path, the rest of the demons had already stopped, and everyone looked down the cliff edge to the slope, and the demon and monster currently rolling down it, toward the huge herd of goorts. Closer and closer, until the slope eventually evened out, and only a few hundred feet separated Adron and the herd.

And, as much as Mia hoped otherwise, Diogo and the other demons didn’t rush down to help their own. They didn’t move on, but they didn’t rush down to help, either. They just stood there, watching.

“We’re not going to help?” Mia asked.

Diogo snorted, and didn’t so much as peek her way. He watched, arms folded across his chest and the small amount of armor he wore.

“If we go down there, we risk the herd rushing us,” Scilra said, prowling over to Mia on all fours, head pointed down the slope.

Mia frowned down at the huge tiger woman. “Is that the only reason?” She regretted it the moment she said it. It came out with venom, and rage, and those two things were going to get her killed down here.

Scilra snorted, same as Diogo, but said nothing. Right, of course. Much as it was risky to go down and help Adron, it also straight up made no sense for them to help him anyway. As David would say, it didn’t compute for them. Demons could be colossal assholes.

Mia stood beside Hannah, and the two women stared on and down, the only thing they could do. Jumping down meant breaking bones, or doing exactly what Scilra said, getting trampled and eaten by a bunch of big horses with ram horns and — probably — sharp teeth.

The basilisk’s rolling came to a stop, and the creature turned its gaze back to Adron. Animals from the surface, from Earth, didn’t usually suicide for a meal unless they were starving to death. But the basilisk didn’t look emaciated. It looked like a well-fed, short-limbed, wingless snake-faced dragon, stomach almost hitting the ground as it threw its weight at Adron.

Adron tried to get his sword up in time, but it wasn’t there. It’d been hooked on his back, but rolling down a hillside had tossed it. He ducked instead, and the creature’s head slipped past Adron’s by inches. It’d struck out first, like a snake, before the rest of its body caught up and it collided with Adron straight on.

Down they went, on their backs, and again the battle turned into a wrestling match.

“Shit. Shit shit shit.” Mia snapped her eyes around. Find something, find anything.

Hannah didn’t so much as move. Her eyes were wide, and her hands froze together in front of her. It almost looked like she was praying.

A noise vibrated through the valley. Quiet at first, a gentle rumble that almost wasn’t there. But as Adron wrestled with the lizard, it grew louder, and louder. The hundreds of black horns in the valley each turned, and hooves gently patted the stone ground. The herd didn’t move, yet, but slowly the distant creatures stomped the ground with their hooves more and more, until the rumbling grew loud enough it couldn’t be ignored. It only got louder, as some of the horses reared and slammed their hooves down, hard, while some of the smaller ones hopped in place from side to side.

Slowly, they moved. Almost in perfect unison like a school of fish, the huge horses walked in Adron’s direction. They didn’t charge, not yet, like they weren’t in a hurry to catch prey. Maybe they thought it better to let the fight play out? A level of intelligence more than a little unsettling. But either way, they were marching straight toward Adron.

Adron was the only demon around that Mia sorta kinda almost trusted. Fuck just standing there and watching him die. She leaned forward, and stuck a foot out over the edge—

Only for Scilra to yank her back, against the mountain wall. At least this time she caught herself before her skull cracked against the stone.

“Diogo will have my hide if you I let you go down there,” she said.

“We have to help him!”

Scilra stared at her, blinking.

“You’d risk your life for him? You barely know him.”

“I didn’t plan to die for him, but I’m not just going to watch him die, either!”

The tiger continued to stare at her, as if Mia spoke some alien language. A weird stand-off, but it gave Mia a second to notice a decent rock beside her. She grabbed it, groaning as her fingers struggled to get a good grip. Must have been as heavy as one of her heavier kettlebells.

“Fine. I won’t go down there.” Mia got up, lifted the rock up to her shoulders with both hands, and marched back up to the edge, beside Scilra. The tregeera got ready to grab her, but Mia didn’t give her a reason to.

She threw the rock straight down at Adron.

“Incoming!”

Again, everyone still on the path looked at Mia like she was insane. Even Adron, on his back with one hand out holding the creature by the neck, looked Mia’s way. More importantly, the rock caught enough velocity and bounced enough it made a racket, enough to grab the giant lizard’s attention.

And, because life — or the afterlife — was a fucking bitch, the rock didn’t roll straight. So much for it crashing into the lizard. It bounced around, hitting uneven surfaces as it rolled, chips flying off as its harsh sound echoed through the valley, almost as loud as the rumbling herd. The goorts weren’t walking anymore. They’d started their charge.

Adron got his huge raptor feet under the distracted lizard, and kicked him off. Demons were damn strong, and the giant creature, bigger than Adron, flew back maybe ten feet. Mia’s rock crashed into the lizard’s back left leg, and the creature shrieked. It hadn’t made much noise before, but when its leg bent sideways at the knee, the creature made up for its silence with a banshee scream.

Adron didn’t hesitate. He got back up, and ran. Not a glance back or a look to the basilisk, Adron full-on sprinted back up the hill, and soon had to use his hands as the slope tilted underneath him.

The basilisk tried to chase, but one step on its broken leg and it fell to its stomach, shrieking and hissing. The rumble grew louder, until it was thunder. But no matter how loud the sound grew, it wasn’t enough to drown out the cries of the wounded lizard as it stared up at Adron with big, red and black snake eyes.

They weren’t demon eyes. Instead of black outsides with a red ring inside and a black pupil like a demon’s, the lizard’s eyes were red on the outside, with black slits in the middle. Red snake eyes.

Despite wanting to watch Adron, Mia couldn’t tear her eyes away from the giant lizard, as a dozen goorts surrounded it. It was bigger than them, and it snapped at them, hissing between snake strikes. But being bigger than them also made it a big target, and one of the goorts charged it from the back, head aimed down at its prostrated body. The goort drove its inertia and weight down at an angle into the lizard, and judging from the shriek that followed, it broke something in the creature.

They charged again and again, and only when the lizard stopped striking at them with its snake head did they close the distance, and stomp it to death. Dozens of hooves, crashing down on the leathery, scaly skin of the big lizard, heavy enough to break but not heavy enough to pierce. The lizard twitched and hissed, gurgled, and died. And the goorts dug in.

So, that was nightmare fuel. Mia couldn’t have nightmares anymore, thank god, but the way the moose…goorts, opened their mouths and ripped the lizard’s thick skin open, spilling its guts, was disgusting. It was like a school of giant piranha, tearing and shredding, somehow managing to avoid biting each other as they pressed side to side to fit in close and take a piece.

Adron climbed up the slope, swordless and probably bruised, but alive. Despite how steep the slope got under the lip of the path the rest of them stood on, Adron climbed without issue. Claws were useful climbing tools, almost like an ice axe, especially when they were that thick and strong.

He pulled himself up onto the ledge. For just a second, it looked like Hannah was going to hug the demon, but instead she came up to him, and poked him in his side against the armor.

“Adron you fucking idiot!”

The tall demon smiled down at his slave.

“You missed me.”

“You nearly died! You… fucking idiot. I can’t kill you if you die.”

Mia raised a brow, looking between the demon and woman. That sounded less like a master slave relationship, and more like romance with a side dish of intent to murder, which was all sorts of fucked up. Then again, it was Hell.

Ignoring the need to squirm at the strange, socially awkward situation, Mia came up to Adron and gave him a quiet smile.

“Thanks, for pushing me out of the way.”

“Hey, don’t thank me. If we didn’t get you to Zel, the boss would have my hide.” Adron gestured to the juggernaut standing at the head of the group, down the path.

The juggernaut snorted, and resumed the march. Not a word.

“Wait,” Mia said, loud enough to get over the noise of everyone shuffling, “we’re not—”

“No, we’re not,” Diogo said. And he said nothing else as he continued the march.

“Thanks for waiting for me, boss,” Adron said, grinning at Diogo’s back. “Half expected everyone to just move on without me.”

Diogo looked back long enough to glare at Adron, before continuing on.

Mia stared at the brute’s giant back, but no matter how hard she tried, for some reason she couldn’t make the bastard explode into a million pieces with the power of her mind. So she did the only thing she could do. She fell in step with everyone else as they resumed the trek toward the spire. Eventually it was Mia with Hannah and Adron and Scilra, with Loria and the other vrat behind them, the two human men and the two sex demons in front of them, and Diogo and his two brutes leading. As if nothing had happened. As if Adron hadn’t just almost died.

“I didn’t expect a big rock to come my way,” Adron said, grinning down at her.

“I didn’t expect everyone to just stand there, watching.” Or for it to piss her off so much, either.

“Wouldn’t really make sense for Diogo to risk more demons dying for me.”

“So everyone just stands there, and waits?”

“Waiting is more than demons would in the Red Pits, or Navameere Fields,” he said. The places Diogo had described as militant.

“You’re telling me Death’s Grip is nice by comparison?”

“Ha. No, just different. Demons in those places wouldn’t hesitate to fight for you, as long as you made no mistakes. The moment you did, they’d let you die to whatever mistake you made, and they’d laugh, too.”

“Mean.”

He laughed. Hannah laughed too. She stood between Mia and Adron, Adron walking on the outer edge of the path, and she poked Mia in the shoulder.

“You really are too nice for Hell.”

“I… guess.”

“She’s right,” Adron said. “It was just a short encounter with a basilisk, anyway. In and out in a jiffy. Happens all the time.”

Hearing a tall sexy demon with big horns, a long tail, and a demon-skull face, say ‘jiffy’, was just too damn much. Mia burst into laughter, until even the tiger demon beside her was chuckling, too.

“I’m glad it worked out,” Mia said. “The rock didn’t exactly go where I aimed.”

“Yeah well, neither did the basilisk. I aimed the kick to push him into the rock’s path, so it’d hit his gut, not his leg.” He shrugged, and poked Mia’s side with his tail. “The rock could have hit me, too, ya know.”

“It was either that or watch you die.”

“Not much faith in me?”

“I uh, I mean, you dropped your sword, and—sword! Your sword—”

“I’ll get a new one. It’s just a slab of meera metal. There’s thousands of them everywhere, since… whenever. Ask Caera where they came from, sometime.”

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~~David~~

“It was during the Nine Spires War,” Caera said, “must have been maybe ten thousand years ago. That’s when all the meera weapons were made. Most, anyway.”

David, Caera, Daoka, and Jeskura walked along the path, and at this point, it was all starting to blur together. Rocks. More rocks, lots and lots of dark rocks, many solid black, many dark red, and a lot of gradients between, with the occasional burning bush. The warm breeze was relentless, and the occasional bead of sweat dripped down his body. The air smelled like it always smelled, like rocks, and blood. But somehow, the demon women knew where to go, and recognized the paths like he recognized the icons on his PC desktop.

This high up, he could feel the heat of the burning sky press down on him. It sucked.

“Long time,” he said. “A… very long time, by human standards. Like, so long ago historians are just grasping at straws trying to explain shit from back then.”

“Hell isn’t the surface, so if you get lucky, you find some runes in Estian, and if you’re familiar with them like I am, you can adjust for the old style of talking. And I’ve managed to find a few places talking about that war. Belor, last child of the Old Ones, was trying to take over Hell. All the spire rulers were at that time, a big free-for-all frenzy that had Hell swimming in demon blood. Belor controlled False Gate, and the anvil beneath the vortex. He used it to make thousands of weapons and suits of armor. Mostly meera, like you see us wearing.” Caera lifted her front leg-arm, long enough to gesture to her, Jes, and Daoka. “He made some aera metal too, but mostly meera.”

“Aera. Meera?”

She shrugged. “I’ve never seen aera metal up close, but I know his generals and strongest soldiers wore it.” She hit his butt with the broadside of her big tail. Thankfully the spikes ran along its spine, not its sides. “Don’t distract me. So, Belor thought if he gave every demon in his horde a weapon and armor, he’d win.”

“Did he?”

“The war between the spires went on for thousands of years until the angels killed Belor, around two thousand years ago, which pretty much stopped the spires from fighting each other. Fighting so directly, at least. Whatever advantage the weapons and armor Belor thought the arms he produced would give him, it didn’t work out, in the end. They’re not as useful to demons as you’d think. They’re heavy, get in the way, and claws cut almost as well as swords and axes.”

They were damn heavy, that was true. Demons were strong enough to wield them, but being strong wouldn’t be enough when trying to wield a fifty-pound sword, and the sword David had tried was probably a small one. Combating the balance, while also wearing even more weight in armor, would be the problem. One swing and you’d spin around or fall over or get thrown to the side, anything.

“The Old Ones—”

“Very old demons,” Caera said. “Supposedly created by Lucifer themselves. Or at least they worked directly for Lucifer. So goes the legends.”

“Wow. And there’s an anvil at the bottom of the vortex?”

“A big one, supposedly.”

“You haven’t seen it?”

“No. False Gate is too far, and too dangerous, ever since Belor died.”

“Really?” he asked. “You’d think it’d be less dangerous.”

“You’d think. It’s not.”

He was tempted to ask for more information, especially about Belor and the anvil, but Caera dropped it so fast he knew better than to pick it up. Look at him, picking up on social cues.

They walked on, and on, and on. Endless paths, each step a pain in the ass, no path worn smooth. Thankfully the demons didn’t move faster than him, and on more than one occasion, he had to slow down for them to catch up. They didn’t like cardio. Good, because he fucking hated cardio. Going for long walks and listening to audiobooks and podcasts was how he did his cardio when he was alive, and without something to listen to, it was torture. For the demons though, they genuinely seemed to struggle with it.

“Break?” he asked. They’d stepped down into another ditch crevice in the rocks, and it went deep enough he felt slightly safer than usual inside it.

Daoka clicked a few times, came up beside him, kissed his cheek, and sat down against the wall of the mountain. She was panting.

“I get that you want to find your sister,” Jeskura said, “but holy fuck dude, slow down.”

Watching the gargoyle, also panting, slump against the wall beside Daoka, was satisfying. For all the times Jeskura had teased him, she couldn’t keep pace with him, not after six hours of non-stop walking at least.

“You can all easily beat me in a race,” he said. “But a long hike is where you draw the line?”

Grumbling deep in her chest, Caera pushed against his back hard enough he stumbled forward, straight onto Dao and Jes’s legs. Dao clicked between some giggles, picked him up and set him between her legs, facing away. He tried to sit up, but she wrapped her arms around him, pinned his back to her chest armor, and rubbed her cheek against the top of his head. He wasn’t going anywhere.

“Demons,” Caera said, a snarl mixing into her voice as she lay in front of him, her side to him and the others as she got comfortable, “are not humans. We burn through resonance doing things. It won’t be long before we need to eat again.”

“Lot of similarities between demons and Earth predators,” he said. “At least, the mammal ones. A big reason humans won — sorta won anyway — the evolution game is we learned to walk upright, and saved a massive amount of energy that way. We learned to hunt with tools, and walked prey to complete exhaustion, poking at them with spears.”

Dao clicked a few times.

“You got that right,” Jes said. “That’s why zombies are so scary, too.”

He laughed. Zombies were scary when he was a kid. As an adult, a young one at that, they didn’t even register on his fear radar.

“I think demons are a lot scarier,” he said.

Jes shook her head. “You can’t be that scared of us, getting horny around us all the damn time.”

“Well… I mean…”

“Some demons out there like using their sin auras to do things to humans. Some like to stir them up, get them angry and violent. Some like to make them horny.”

“Like a succubus or incubus?”

Jes nodded. “Yeah, volaras or volarins do that all the time, since they aren’t very strong, and their sin auras are powerful as fuck. But any demon can use their aura, tilt it toward that desire, and push it out to try and influence everyone with it.” She poked him in the side with her tail, and Dao clicked a few angry times as she swiped the tail aside. His new bodyguard. “But, I haven’t used my sin on you. Neither has Dao. You’re the one using yours on us.”

“I don’t know,” Caera said. “Right now, I can feel something, but it doesn’t feel like sin.”

“Just wait till he’s looking to fuck again. It’s like getting bowled over by a goort.”

The tiger chuckled as she watched him. “I look forward to seeing that.” There was a touch of huskiness in her voice that sent a tingle up his spine.

Dao clicked happily, chuckling as she slipped a hand into David’s shaggy red hair, and combed it with her claws. Never, ever, had anyone done that to him, caressed his scalp like that. He melted, and his eyes half closed as his head relaxed back against Dao’s sternum.

“I… I um… I guess I’ve always liked… you know, like art of demon girls, monster girls, things like that.” No point in being shy about things like that, not with these ladies, not after last night. “I’m definitely not alone. Millions of guys — and girls — like it too, if the internet is any indicator of reality.”

“True,” Caera said. “But usually when fresh meat come down here, the new reality sorta crushes those silly fantasies.”

“Not for this kid,” Jes said, poking him with her tail again. Dao caught the tail and squeezed, and Jes let out a small yelp as she yanked her tail free. “Not that I can blame him. We are fucking beautiful. And hey, maybe you’re part demon? It might explain the aura, and the dick.”

“Humans can’t be part demon,” Caera said. “How would that even work?”

“I don’t know, but I know what I felt. That was an aura. He’s clearly not human.”

David groaned, but Daoka slipped both her hands into his hair again, and the world melted away. Claws, gently scratching his scalp, while the undersides of her fingertips massaged. Being touched so tenderly, he’d no idea it’d feel like this.

“He’s clearly human,” Caera said. “He’s got a reservoir of resonance inside him and he’s not burning through it. What else has that other than a human? Even angels burn through their resonance.”

“What do you know about angels?” he asked. “And… And Heaven, and stuff.” The place he was supposed to be.

“Not much. Only a few runes speak of them. But demons figured out some things, after the few times angels got involved in our wars. Angels use resonance, same as demons. They burn it off to create essence, same as us, and they can use the essence to summon armor and weapons.”

“Oh wow.”

“There were a couple accounts of angels using some bright light to block attacks, and another about using a bright light to heal wounds.”

“Double wow. Can demons do anything magical like that?”

“Just the sin aura,” she said. “Though, if you’re strong enough, you can create hellfire.”

“Hellfire?”

“Zel can do that,” Jes said. “I don’t know if it’s because she’s got the spire crown or because she’s just damn old. But I once saw her execute a demon who’d step out of line, by breathing hellfire on him. It was terrifying. She turned the guy into ash and melted the fucking blackstone around him. Basically turned the fucker into meera metal.”

“She made meera?” he asked.

“The armor we’re wearing,” Caera said, and she clawed the wall behind her until a pebble of black stone fell free of the more reddish rock, “is made of blackstone, melted down, and mixed with demon bone. The only place to do that easily is the anvil at False Gate, but there are other ways to make it.”

“Mixed with demon bones?”

“Fresh human bones work, too. Not remnant bones, though.”

“Bones? What? That… doesn’t sound like good alloying.”

Jes poked him with her closer wing’s thumb claw. Daoka had to adjust her strategy to prevent further pokes, swiping up at the big flag of leathery skin.

“The fuck is alloying?”

“Mixing metals with other things to make the metal more usable, less brittle, things like that.”

Caera laughed. “Hell doesn’t give a shit about chemistry, David.”

“I guess not.”

Arms slipped around David’s chest, and hugged him tight to Dao as she clicked a few times, quietly and deeply. No need for a translator. She sounded worried.

“Yeah,” Jes said. “Tacitus can use hellfire too, supposedly. Scary fucker. Wouldn’t surprise me if he tried taking on Zel, given a decade or two.”

“Who is he?”

Dao clicked a couple times, and rested her cheek on top of his head.

“He’s a tetrad demon, a gorujin,” Caera said. “A young one, but even a young tetrad is a problem for everyone.”

“Think me,” Jes said, gesturing to herself, “except male body, ten feet tall, and four horns.”

That sounded kind of badass, and scary.

“Why’s he want Daoka?”

More clicks. Dao let her hands go limp on David’s thighs, claws going still, her right cheek still on his head.

“Because Tacitus is a controlling, manipulative, horrible bastard,” Jes said. “He thought he owned Daoka. One day she was out doing her own thing, Tacitus wanted her, so he sent an enforcer to fetch her. Daoka fought him off, and the enforcer ended up dying in the fight. So of course Tacitus is pissed. Can’t comprehend someone not doing what he wants, and he can’t let that defiance go unpunished. It’d ruin his image. Now he wants Dao either back, or dead.”

David slowly tilted his head, just enough so Dao could tell he was looking up at her, or at least trying to. But she didn’t move her head, and he gave up. If she wanted to hold onto him like a support dog, he was fine with that. It felt… nice, in her arms.

Jes hooked her wings around her shoulders and neck like a cape, and slid in a little closer until her shoulder pressed to Dao’s.

“Leos didn’t give her up, when Diogo found out Dao was hiding with me. Diogo killed him.”

“That… that’s…” Fuck, what to say? He didn’t know how to say anything that didn’t sound insincere or stupid. Where was Mia when he needed her.

“Diogo and Tacitus are both bastards,” Caera said. “Zel is, too, but Diogo and Tacitus are reachable. We can kill them, if we’re smart about it.”

Dao clicked softly, chuckling weakly, cheek still on his head.

“I’ll have you know I am a smart cookie,” Jes said to the satyr. “But, yes, I admit it might not work out in our favor to walk in, guns blazing.”

“Do they have guns in Hell?” he asked.

“Nope.”

“I’m starting to think demons watch the scrying pools… a lot.”

Caera laughed. “They are, especially these days. It used to take take decades before anything interesting happened on the surface. Now, every week something insane happens, or some new TV show comes out.”

Dao clicked a few times before turning her head slightly, cheek rubbing against David’s hair as she looked to Jes.

“We still sharing life stories?” Jes said. “’Cause I mean I already kinda shared mine. Diogo’s a fucking shit and killed my friend.”

“What about Zel?” he asked. “I think you said you worked with her, or something?”

Sighing, Jes flopped her tail on her lap beside him, and ran her claws along its near-onyx leathery skin.

“Yeah, I did. I’m good in a fight, real good. Zel likes that. But I was ‘trouble’”— she air quoted trouble— “and got into fights with a lot of her closer enforcers. Then she met Saldavin and Gorlus, and everything went to shit. Now she’s convinced she can get Death’s Grip strong, real strong. Nine Spires War strong, and start taking over other spires.”

“Saldavin? Gorlus?”

“Her two new best friends,” Caera said. “She met them… ten years ago? Two more tetrads, both korgejin. With so many tetrad working for her, Zel’s gotten full of herself. It won’t be long before she binds people to a horde, and sends us into the Black Valley to fight Alessio or something.”

“I wonder,” Jes said, “what sort of bullshit those two fuckers whispered into her ear to convince her this was a good idea.”

“What do korgejin look like?”

Dao clicked and motioned to her feet near his, him still sitting between her legs.

The gargoyle nodded and gestured to Dao as well. “Yeah, they have hooves and no tail. Big fucking wings, though. And they’re as big as the other tetrad demons.” She reached out and poked Dao above the nose with a claw. “And they have eyes.”

Dao shrugged, clicking quietly as she got comfortable resting her head on David’s again. Judging from the sound, she thought eyes were overrated.

“What’s a horde? How does that work?”

Dao and Jes went quiet, before the two demons looked Caera’s way. And judging from the look in the tiger’s eyes, he’d hit a sore spot.

Grumbling, Caera sat up — like a cat, of course — and undid the strap holding a slab of metal to her right shoulder. She aimed it at him. There was an X drawn on the shapely shoulder, in the classic place humans loved to get tattoos. No, not exactly an X, but mostly one, with some shapely corners that curled in toward themselves.

“Zel gave me this, over a hundred years ago.”

“A hundred years…” He gulped. Caera was old. Was that why she had a bit of that mature quality to her face? Couldn’t be, not when Jeskura was sixty and looked like a demon tomboy, with big, expressive, I’m-gonna-beat-you-up eyes. “How’d that happen?”

“Zel went to war with Alessio, of the Black Valley, counter-clockwise from here. She—”

Ah fuck. He had to.

“Sorry, sorry, but this is driving me nuts. What did demons call it before clocks?” He shouldn’t have interrupted her, but he had to ask before he forgot again and his brain ripped itself apart.

Caera blinked at him. “What?”

“I get that Hell is a circle, and with no way to contextualize a direction outside it, you can only go clockwise or counter-clockwise, but those are words from the surface, right? What’d you call it before then?”

Caera stared at him like he’d exploded.

“David,” Jes said, groaning, “you are brain damaged.”

He frowned at the gargoyle. Surely they couldn’t fault him for wanting to know how things worked. He had to know. He always had to know.

Caera laughed, a deep, full sound, and her tail wagged lightly as she put the armor back on her shoulder, and lay down again.

“You are too damn cute.”

He squirmed a bit, blushing again. Which of course Dao took as opportunity to hug him tighter until he struggled to breathe.

“Thanks,” he gasped.

“A cute nerd,” Jes said, poking at him with her tail again with Dao too busy to stop her.

“I wasn’t around back then,” Caera said, “but far as I know, demons usually used the Forgotten Place, the center of Hell, as their reference point, and said right or left. Sometimes East or West.”

“Hmm, kinda like… if you looked down at Earth from the North Pole, East is counter-clockwise.” His brain actually exploded. “But if you looked at Earth from the South Pole, East is clockwise, so that—”

Daoka gently covered his mouth, giggled and clicked, and kissed the crown of his head.

Caera grinned at him, relaxing as she rolled over onto her side slightly.

“Did you want to learn about hordes, or how to tell directions in Hell?”

Both. He really wanted to say both.

“Hordes,” he said between Daoka’s fingers.

“You already know about auras. Spire rulers have access to a unique aura: summoning the horde. It’s powerful, and goes far, nearly to the border of the province it owns. It sucks you in, covers your mind, and before you know it, you’re heading toward the spire to join the horde. Every inch of you wants to join the mass, swarm over your target, and rip and tear until it’s dead. A deep need that’s…” With a heavy sigh, Caera flopped over completely, on her side with her arms and legs out beside her. It was a shitty memory for her. He didn’t need Mia to tell him that. “The only demons the summon doesn’t seem to work on is imps and grems. Or at least, not well enough to really harness them.”

“And the brand?”

“Seals it in. Binds you to the call and its purpose. Zel uses the spire’s tools to make sure you can’t break free of the call until it’s done.”

“Spire’s tools…”

The tiger shook her head. “I don’t know enough to talk about the spires and their tools, but it’s how they rule. It’s not some empty position with no power. Zel can and does rule Death’s Grip with her own power, and the power the spire gives her. She’s more than capable of enforcing her position.”

“Yeah,” Jes said. “Zel is a scary bitch. We have to be careful, the closer we get to the spire.”

“Sounds like we have a lot of enemies,” he said.

“She’s not my enemy,” Caera said.

The gargoyle stuck her tail out and whacked the tiger on the hand.

“Yet. She’s not your enemy yet. When she finds out what you’ve been up to, you know she’s going to put on you the kill list, like Diogo did Dao and me.”

It was a good thing Death’s Grip wasn’t organized. Dao and Jes had been out and around, hunting for a meal when they found David, and assured him as long as they didn’t get close to other demons, they’d be fine. Did they not have surveillance cameras in Hell? Binoculars or telescopes? Anything?

Hell really was medieval.

“I hope she… she doesn’t hurt Mia,” he said.

Daoka clicked a few times and hugged him again.

Jes nodded. “Yeah, I doubt Zel will eat her anytime soon, if ever. She’s patient. She’ll try and figure out how to use her first. And that’s of course assuming we can’t catch up to Diogo and figure out a way to kill him.”

Caera shook her head. “We’re not gonna catch up, you know that.”

Daoka clicked, louder than usual.

“Exactly,” Jes said. “Any number of things could happen. Maybe Mia will hit them all with the same aura David did us, and they’ll spend a whole day and night in one big orgy?”

Groaning, he rubbed his eyes with his palms. “Please don’t make me think about that.”

“Hey, this is the only way to keep your horny brain on the goal.” Jeskura climbed up to her feet, stretched out her wings, shook out her tail, and got moving. “Let’s go. We’ll find something to eat tomorrow.”

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~~Mia~~

They found a crevice, higher up along the mountain wall than the others nearby. There were crevices everywhere, small ravines, rock ditches, everything a mountainscape that wanted to kill her could offer. That included bloodgrip, a black, ever-so-slightly green vine with red thorns, that had a habit showing up in places her hands wanted to brace against. She hadn’t stabbed herself, yet, because either Adron or Scilra were always ahead of her, calling it out.

“We stop here,” Diogo said. “Tomorrow’s rekindling is the last before we reach the spire.” Nodding to himself, Diogo sat down against a wall of stone, and didn’t move. Talk about being literal.

Mia watched the group prepare for the night. No one got naked and asked an incubus to finger them. No one grabbed anyone else and used them like a fleshlight. No one even asked for a quick blowjob. Everyone found rocks and grooves to settle into for the night, and the few that’d take first watch took high perches. Hopefully the lack of sexual activity was coincidental, and not because Mia had been decidedly not-horny ever since she’d nearly been pounced by a giant lizard that also nearly killed the closest thing she had to a bodyguard at the moment.

She didn’t know if she should not want that, not want it to be true that the weird tingling sensation all the demons were feeling, was linked to the subtle vibration she sometimes felt inside her. If it was true, then there was something special about her, something that had all the demons confused, and would guarantee Zel took an interest in her. Maybe she’d try and use her as a tool for power. And maybe she’d eat her, hoping to gain that power. But then, if she was a perfectly normal human, Zel would have no reason to keep her alive at all.

Nights in Hell lasted about twelve hours, and her afterlife body seemed to still want about eight hours of sleep. Perfect for night watch. A third of the demons took a shift for four hours, then another third for the next four, then another third for the next four. A perfect balance all the demons understood innately.

But for the humans, it was a little different. They weren’t asked to keep watch, and actually got to spend some time doing whatever they wanted before sleep took them. They could sleep all twelve hours if they wanted; their afterlife bodies seemed okay doing that, too. But Mia had other plans.

She sat down beside Hannah. Adron took first watch, and Hannah found a spot against the mountain wall that cut in a bit, an alcove that covered her sides and overhead a little. Like an animal, finding a place that would protect her the most.

Hannah was a bit taller than Mia, but not by all that much. Short blond hair and blue eyes, and just as slim as Mia, too, with thinner legs, and slightly larger breasts. Very much a ballerina build.

Mia sat down next to her.

“You’re in great shape, you know,” Mia said.

“Had to be, to survive here.”

“Oh, you got in shape down here? You can do that? Your body shape isn’t permanent?”

“Yeap.” Hannah held out an arm, and flexed her bicep. It wasn’t a big bicep, but a lot better than most girls. “Being a betrayer only takes you so far.”

A betrayer, right. 666 etched on her forehead and everything.

“I—”

“I know you want to ask. Just ask.”

“I…” Wincing, Mia took a deep breath, and looked away to stare at Adron’s back in the distance. “What’d you do? To end up in Hell?”

Hannah let out a slow sigh, and shrugged. “Bunch of things, really. I was driving once, out in a remote area to visit someone. It was dark. I hit someone by accident. I drove off.”

A sledgehammer, to the guts.

“You didn’t… call 911 or something?”

“Nope. Didn’t want to get in trouble.” Oh god. “I did other things, too. When I was young, I stole money from other kids. Stole from my friends and strangers when I got older. I was good at that, good at being quick.”

“I… I…”

“Not long before I died, I lied about my ex-boyfriend beating me, and got him in a lot of trouble.”

“Jesus.”

Hannah laughed, shaking her head as she pulled her knees up. It wasn’t long before her head dangled, weighed down by something. On anyone else, Mia would have thought guilt or shame, but Hannah spoke about her past with the arrogance of a sociopath. For a few moments, anyway. The woman shuddered eventually as the mask crumbled, the sort of shuddering Mia had seen before, sometimes in the mirror. She was trying to not cry.

“I don’t think that’s what did it, though,” Hannah said.

“No?”

“No. It wasn’t actually… doing the things, that got me sent down here. I think it was the way I felt about it. I felt…” She pulled her knees up to her chest and hugged them. “I didn’t give a shit about whoever I hit with the car. The people I stole from, I thought they were pathetic for being so stupid to leave their stuff open like that. All the better for me, the only person who mattered. And my ex, I wanted to hurt him. I wanted to really, really hurt him. And when I did, I felt good. I felt great. It felt amazing, seeing him in pain.” After a sad laugh, Hannah managed to lift her heavy head and stared up at the burning sky. “Joke’s on me, right?”

It took surprisingly little poking to get the girl to talk about her apparently fucked-up past. Mia was probably the first person Hannah had talked to who gave a shit about her, judging from what she’d seen of the other humans and demons, except maybe Adron.

“Do you… still feel that way?”

“What’re you, a therapist?”

Mia smiled. “Second year psychology major at university, so just enough knowledge to think I know what I’m doing, not nearly enough to actually know what I’m doing.”

“Ha, fuckin’ right. I knew a lot of smart assholes full of themselves. But you seem to have a head on your shoulders.”

“So do you.”

Hannah laughed, tiny sobs choked away.

“Yeah, well, I learned a lot of shitty lessons down here. I’m not the same person I was, back on the surface. But it doesn’t fucking matter now. The only way out of Hell is dying, and now I have to die a fucking lot to make that happen.”

“Can I ask, how high was your number when you were sent here?”

“125.”

“That’s—”

“Not as high as a lot of people’s numbers, I know. But, fuck me, I didn’t want to die again.”

“But—”

Hannah dismissed Mia with a flick of the wrist.

“Don’t. Fucking don’t. I know, okay? I fucking know. I was stupid. No need to rub salt in the wound.”

Silence fell on them, a big heavy wet blanket smothering them. Mia wasn’t this girl’s sister or lover or anything, so why push so hard?

Because it hurt, seeing someone else in pain. She knew that about herself well enough.

“Can I ask how you died?”

“You just asked.”

“Trying to be polite.”

“Don’t. Being polite is a big flag over your head that something’s up, and will get you attention you don’t want.” Shrugging, Hannah gestured out vaguely. “I suppose I should have died in some poetic way, right? Get my comeuppance and shit? I died in a car accident. My new boyfriend wasn’t a very good driver.”

“Anticlimactic.”

“Ha, true.”

Mia smiled at her maybe, possibly, new friend. Yeah sure, Hannah had apparently been one colossal bitch when she was alive, the sort of girl who made her entire gender look bad, lying about her boyfriend and getting him in trouble. She’d been the sort of girl Mia would have detested. Except, the girl sitting beside her didn’t seem to be that other girl.

And Hell didn’t care. Hannah had changed down here, where it didn’t matter. Too little too late. What a fucking shitty afterlife.

Hannah glanced Adron’s way. Without his sword on his back, the lean shape of his waist connecting up to his broad shoulders was gorgeous, and both girls watched him as he scanned the cliff edge to the paths below. A damn handsome man, demon, person. And compared to the other demons, a nice guy. Yeah sure he was confident, and what girl didn’t go weak at the knees for a confident guy? The other demons were confident too, but they weren’t nice. He was. Sorta.

“You like him,” Mia said.

“He’s a bastard who’s got me wrapped around his finger.”

“But…”

“But, yes, I like him.” She rolled her eyes as she let her legs go loose in front of her. “He told me if I ever manage to kill him, I get to go up the respect ladder. Demons will treat me like one of them. I’ll be free.”

“Free.” Being free didn’t sound all that good, considering the locale. “How many times have you tried to kill him?”

“Over the years? Must have been ten or twelve times by now.”

“Yeesh.”

“Got close a couple times, too. Maybe someday I’ll pull it off. But… I don’t even know if I should.” Hannah shook her head and gestured to Mia. “You like him, too.”

“I mean, he seems nice, and he’s… dare I say it, fun.”

Hannah’s grin was positively evil.

“All you gotta do is ask.”

“Ask? Ask what?”

“If you can fuck Adron.” Hannah shrugged and gave Mia an all-too-playful slap on the knee. “I wouldn’t mind watching that. Tiny thing like you trying to fit him inside you? I bet you’d wriggle like a worm on a hook, all the way down.”

So much for not thinking about sex anymore. But before the vibration could start up in her guts again, Mia gave herself a nice slap on the face, earning a raised a brow and an eventual chuckle from Hannah.

“Maybe another time.”

“Suit yourself.”

“And, I’m kinda surprised you’d just share him like that.”

“Adron’s been fucking me and only me for years, but it’s not exactly a normal relationship. I’m his slave. He’s my master. I’ll kill him, some day.” She shrugged. “But either way, he’s not my boyfriend either.”

“But you like him.”

“What, you never wanted to share your boyfriend with another set of legs? Or get a girl’s lips around your clit while your boy fucks you?”

“Uh…” Uh oh. Mia squirmed, and damn it, her pale skin flushed red in seconds until she felt her pulse in her cheeks.

“Well well well, a virgin.”

“I’ll have you know I had plenty of toys.” Large, ridiculous, awesome toys.

Hannah winked at her. “It’s not the same, at all.”

Before Mia could stop her, Hannah hopped back up to her feet, and marched over the Adron. Double uh oh.