

~~Story Blurb~~

An epic fantasy adventure through Hell, with demons and angels, and a couple humans with targets painted on their back. David and Mia didn't want to be a part of this, but their unexpected first deaths land them in the middle of events grand and beyond knowing. Why are they in Hell in the first place? Why don't they have the mark of the Beast, like other souls do? And why does everyone either want them, or want them dead?

~~What You're In For~~

I should preface this with a quick breakdown of how I write, because The Pleasures of Hell will be a very long series. The first chapter will be double length so people can get a feel for my writing style before jumping into the series, but in case you want a little more info, here you go.

If you've read my previous work, this series will be at least as long as My Little Ventrue if not longer, with many books and side content. There will be lots of dialog, with a big focus on characters, and not too heavy on exposition dumps. The story will get complicated as layer upon layer of plots and events are peeled like an onion, but I keep the focus on the characters and their trials, struggles, and romantic developments. It's a character drama, not a political historic hard fantasy. People will sometimes die, and sometimes the story might get a little horror-ish and scary, but rest assured, I don't butcher my characters left and right for cheap thrills.

Sex scenes will occasionally be long and descriptive, but those scenes will start and end with ♥♥♥ so you can skim over them if you're not in the mood for porn.

~~Erotic Content~~

Skip this section if you don't want to be spoiled about the sort of sexual content this series will explore.

Sexy monster-on-human scenes with size difference will be the most frequent theme. David and Mia are small compared to most demons, though David will also sleep with not-so-huge partners occasionally as well. Harems and reverse harems will be explored, along with more intimate romance.

Most sex scenes will be heterosexual in nature, with some occasional girl-on-girl, and plenty of vaginal, anal, and double penetration. Threesomes, foursomes, fivesomes, and more will eventually be explored. No incest, David and Mia are not into each other. Mia will often be on the receiving end of dominant behavior from male demons, some spanking and choking, being pinned down and penetrated in many ways, etc. David will often be pinned and fucked by many female demons of varying sizes, but will also occasionally get to indulge in dominant behavior, too. Large and deep penetration will be frequently explored, with varying degrees of belly bulging/stomach deformation.

There will be occasional reluctance sex scenes, but nothing extreme. Both participants will always enjoy themselves.

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~~The Pleasures of Hell~~

~~Day 1~~

~~Mia~~

Dying sucked. She hadn't expected it to, but there it was. All the old movies made it seem like a quick and borderline painless process. New movies, not so much, but she didn't like new movies.

She stared down at her body, her open eyes, and her open mouth leaking milk and cereal on the small, round, black table that'd cost a whole fifty cents. It teetered when she ate. It wasn't teetering anymore.

Right next to her was David, her brother. Same state, head on the table, or rather, kinda on the table. Poor guy's face was straight down in his bowl of cereal, milk splashed everywhere. No bubbles.

"Whoa," David said. She almost jumped. He was standing next to her, staring down at his body with the same frozen fascination and confusion she was.

Her twin brother David had shortish red hair, with soft green eyes and a clean-shaven face showing his freckles; not that the guy could grow a beard if he tried. He stared at her for a few more seconds before looking back down at his body sitting on the lawn chair they'd confiscated from a nearby garbage pile, for their equally shitty dorm.

Mia came up behind her body, and stared down at her dead expression. Same sort of face as her brother, freckles, pale skin, soft eyes, vibrant green, and long and mostly straight red hair that reached the center of her back. A small woman, maybe five feet tall on a good day. She never minded being short, unlike her bro, but right now it made the horror scene in front of her even more sickening. She was just a... a small thing, sitting there, dead, with eyes wide open.

David reached down for his body's shoulders, gasped, and yanked his hand back. His fingers had passed through his body, like a—

“Ghost,” Mia said. “We’re... ghosts.”

“Oh shit.” David gulped, eyes locked on his body, then hers, before looking at her her, ghost her. “You’re naked.”

She blinked at him, looked down at herself, and then at him.

“So are you. We’re ghosts. I... guess clothes don’t come with you when you die.” Which probably threw a lot of old beliefs to the curb.

“Fuck me,” he said. “That... that... really fucking sucked.”

“I know, right?” She threw up her hands and gestured to their corpses, before stomping around their dorm. Apparently ghosts could stomp. “That hurt! I just, started fucking choking on nothing, and everything hurt, and my insides felt like they were on fire!”

“Heart attack?”

“We both died of a heart attack at the same time?”

David shrugged. “Well it’s not like we were poisoned. You started eating ten minutes before I did. And who the fuck would poison us?”

She stared at her body a little more, her little white t-shirt and her shitty boxers, and the cheap cereal that’d probably doomed her to dying of cancer eventually anyway. After a couple more seconds of cold silence, she threw up her hands again, screamed, and marched into their tiny living room, attached to the tiny kitchen. The dorm had concrete walls, so it wasn’t like anyone would hear her if she screamed herself hoarse.

It wasn’t like anyone would hear her no matter what, anymore.

She looked at the torn-up loveseat, the only seat in the small living room. She looked at the TV collecting dust. She looked at the exercise equipment she shared with her brother, gymnastic rings and resistance bands and kettlebells. She tried picking one up, and sure enough, her hand passed through it.

She looked back to David. The fact they were naked was a little more obvious now that she had half a dozen feet between them. David was in great shape for a little guy, and so was she, lean and fit, all with the goal of getting laid — ha — and living a long life — ha ha.

He wandered around the table, circling it, holding his chin and going into his classic nerd detective mode. Given some time, he'd eventually freak out and panic when the reality of what was happening set in. The panic was already setting in for her.

David stepped around the counter, past the shitty microwave and fridge, past the spot where an oven should have been but wasn't, and tried to open the cupboards. Again, his fingers went right through them.

“Dead,” he said. “We’re... actually dead.”

“Yeah.” Finally, it was sinking into his thick skull. “We’re fucking dead.”

“No more class...”

“Did you actually want to go to class?”

“I was kinda enjoying programming.”

Sighing, she walked down the hall and into the tiny bathroom.

“Yeah. I was kinda enjoying Psych 201.” No need to stick her head out to speak. The concrete walls and their thin coating of white paint made all sound bounce. Seemed to continue doing so for ghost voices.

She stared at the mirror. Normally she'd see a small, cute-approaching-sexy ginger woman with small breasts, a flat stomach, and a surprisingly nice, firm ass. Now, she saw nothing. Sure, she saw herself just fine when she looked down, and everything seemed perfectly normal. She wasn't hazy or see-through or anything, and minus the lack of clothes, she seemed to look identical to how she'd looked right before dying. David looked the same. Just, no reflection. So far, most her ideas about ghosts were being tossed out the window.

“Oh shit!” David said.

She stuck her head out the doorway, nearly falling over when she tried to grab the door frame for balance. Her hand passed through it. Ghost rules were strange.

“What?”

David ran past her and into his bedroom, bedroom door open; not that it'd have mattered. She followed after him.

“I can't... oh fuck oh fuck.” He tried to grab his mouse and keyboard. No good. He desperately tried to turn off his PC next to the barely standing old wooden desk. No good. His hands phased through everything, leaving the monitor with the naked, posing succubus background in plain view.

“David,” she said. “No one's going to give a shit about your background. Besides, we're dead. Who fucking cares about—”

“Not my background! My browser history! Oh fuck oh fuck oh fuck.”

She stared at her brother as he swung his hands fruitlessly at his mouse and keyboard again and again, and she laughed. She couldn't help it. The laughter ripped up through her and had her struggling to breathe — somehow — and she teetered back as she reached out for the door frame. And fell flat on her ass as her hand phased through it.

“Got some kinky porn you don't want the world to know about?” Okay, this was good. They were dead but they could still laugh about shit. They— “Oh fuck my toys!”

David stopped swinging at his desk long enough to look at her before she disappeared down the tiny hall into her own bedroom and its white concrete walls. She reached for the handle for her small closet and tried to swing it open, but of course it didn't go anywhere. But, she was dead, so she stepped through the door and into the darkness of her closet.

Apparently ghosts couldn't see in pitch black, but she knew her way around her closet in the dark well enough. She'd opened it and gone digging for her toys in the dark hundreds of times. But, again, once her fingers found the big box, it was pointless. Untouchable. The box, sitting at the top of the closet, filled with all kinds of vibrators, lubricants, and very strange, very large dildos, was doomed to be found by whoever investigated their room. The whole university was going to find out she liked to fill herself with toys, frequently, most of them not based on any human penis. She was going to be the laughing stock of everyone.

She choked down her sudden urge to cry, clenched her fists, got up and out of her closet, and walked back into David's room.

David looked at her with terrified eyes. “You think... you think they'll check my internet history?”

“Guaranteed.”

“Oh nooooo.”

“Can’t be any worse than my dildos.”

“I beg to differ!”

She shook her head as she rolled her eyes. “Dave, I have a dildo that looks like it belongs on a dragon. A large one.”

He shrugged. “What girl doesn’t? I have so much... really fucked up hentai shit on here, you know? Not anatomically possible shit!”

There they went again, comparing who was the bigger pervert. Well, at least that was better than panicking.

“I have a double dildo that looks like two hor—you know what? Let’s not do this. We’re dead. And no one’s reviving us. We shouldn’t care about who finds our fucking porn history or sex toys.”

Easier said than done. She couldn’t stop picturing it, every uni student scrolling on their phone and being shocked at Mia’s death, but then laughing at the reveal of her toys. Would whoever found their bodies share that information publicly? God fucking christ she hoped not.

“Fuck fuck fuck. You’re sure this isn’t a dream, Mia?”

She pinched herself as hard as she could. Plenty of pain, but that was all. Why the fuck did her ghost body feel pain? Being dead sucked.

“This isn’t a dream.”

“Fuuuuuuck.”

She moved over to David’s bed, ignored his nudity, almost sat down, stopped herself before she phased through it, and laid on the floor instead. She didn’t care she was naked anymore. David and Mia had seen each other naked a few times growing up together, and really didn’t care anyway.

“We’re dead,” she said.

“I know.”

“We’re dead.”

“Evidently.”

“We’re... dead.”

“Apparently.”

She sat up and threw her arms up again. “The fuck do we do?”

“Panic?”

“We’re not panicking!” Fuck, she sounded like she was panicking.

“Okay, we’re not panicking. Let’s... Let’s confirm.”

“Confirm we’re dead?”

He nodded, got up, stepped over her and headed back into the kitchen. It took him a whole seven steps. She followed.

Their bodies were still there, but it wasn’t them David headed toward. He took a right, stepped up to the apartment door, gulped, and walked through it. Naked. She almost yelled out to put some clothes on, but reality smacked her brain around a bit, and she groaned before following after him.

She froze as other people in the dorm walked by. Walked by, and almost directly through her. She dodged at the last second, but when someone else walked and went through David, she gave up dodging the second person. Straight through her, no sensation, nothing. They didn’t look at her or her naked body, and they didn’t so much as make a sound when they were literally inside her, and her inside them.

“Hello?” David said. No one reacted.

“We’re dead,” she said, shoulders drooping.

“Yeah... confirmed. We’re dead.”

They both stood in the hallway as more students went to morning classes, most of them around nineteen like Mia and David. Young, most of them completely unaware of what it was like to have their next door neighbor die on them. They were going to find out, eventually. It’d be days, maybe weeks, before anyone would bother to check on a couple uni students not going to class. And it wasn’t like they had any parents keeping an eye on them who’d call and ask the university to check on them.

David took a deep breath, and walked down the hall.

“Where you going?” she asked.

“I wanna try something.”

“Try something? Like... contacting whoever we’re supposed to contact?”

He looked back over his shoulder at her, eyebrow raised.

“We’re supposed to contact someone?”

“I dunno, are we?”

“No idea.” He shrugged and stepped into the shower room.

Of. Fucking. Course.

She groaned as she followed him in. The dormitory was unisex, and the bathrooms in each dorm didn't have a shower. You could brush your teeth and take a shit in your place, but if you wanted a shower you had to go to the shower room, which had separate stalls for showers.

David stepped through the door, looked around, and casually walked through the nearest stall side-on, and into it.

“David!” God damn it. She followed after him, and the world blurred into a mess of colors and shades as she stepped through the shower stall wall, and into David's back. Okay, she could collide with her brother, good to know.

He stumbled forward before turning around and facing her.

“What?”

“David you idiot! This isn't the—” Mia blinked as she stared at the naked woman showering. Marcy Thomson. Attractive as all fuck, busty as all fuck, and washing herself. There'd always been rumors that Marcy had had surgery to get tits like that, but fake tits didn't ripple like that.

Mia glared at David, marched forward through Marcy into her brother, and shoved him into the next stall. Empty.

“Weren't you just thinking about what the fuck do we do now?” she asked. “What, you're suddenly okay being a ghost and now you're gonna spy on naked chicks?” Standing naked with her brother in a shower stall while another woman, oblivious to them, was busy washing her giant tits in the next stall, was not what she wanted to be doing.

“I'm in denial.”

“You're not in denial. You know we're dead. You confirmed, right?”

He shook his head. “Clearly I'm still in denial and want to wander around and spy on naked chicks.”

Mia threw up her hands. “Dude, you don't even know if you can get hard as a ghost! The fuck is the point in all this spying if you can't jerk off?” And, unfortunately, she glanced down at her brother's

dick, and rolled her eyes and looked away. Well, he wasn't hard, but he was shaved, same as her, which put the annoying image of her brother shaving his junk in her head. Ugh.

“Just... let me be a pervert for a little bit before the existential crisis of being dead really sets in, okay? I'm sure I can panic a bunch later about it.”

“Uh huh.”

He squinted at her with one eye. “Don't even give me that shit. You're just as much a pervert as me. You don't have any dudes you want to spy on?”

“Not spy on!” Okay, that wasn't entirely true, but James and Adam and Mark and Derrick and Tim and Oscar and Sam and Nathan and Josh and the other James and Tony and Brian were all probably in class. “Fuck, yes, but not spy on. I—oh god.”

David's eyes opened wide. “What?”

“We died virgins.”

David collapsed to his knees, and slapped the shower room floor.

“Noooooooooooo!”

It took effort to not fall to her knees and join him.

“Come on. I mean, yeah, I wouldn't mind spying on some people, too, but I'm a little more worried about being dead and I don't think we should procrastinate on dealing with it.” Whatever dealing with it would entail.

David sniffed and gulped, nodded, and forced himself back to his feet.

“Okay.”

“Okay.” She stepped out of the stalls, and waited for him to follow. He did, out of the other stall with Marcy. “God damn it Dave.”

“I'm here I'm here.”

“Okay. What do we do?”

“How could I possibly know what to do?”

“I'm sure you've read a book on after-death experiences.” She could always trust her brother to know random shit about random shit.

“I’ve read a few articles and stuff, sure.” He shrugged as the two of them stepped back out into the hall. “Pretty much every out-of-body experience has been discredited. It’s all bullshit.”

“All of it?”

“No one’s managed to provide any even remotely decent evidence to back it up. And every ghost, haunting, and shit like that, is in the same ballpark. There isn’t any good evidence anywhere, and I can’t come to a conclusion about what to do or how to do it, without some kind of evidence.”

“Okay, then we wing it.” Nodding, she grabbed his hand, did her best to ignore they were both still naked, and took them down the hall to the stairs. Their feet and hands interacted with the floor, for some reason, so unless they developed the ability to hover and fly through shit like movie ghosts did, they had to take the stairs. Maybe they could learn to do that shit with time?

Except, why the fuck would they stick around? Other than indulging their perviness and spying on people, what possible fucking reason did they have to stick around? Ghosts haunted shit because they couldn’t let go, supposedly anyway.

David and Mia didn’t have anything, or anyone, they were holding onto.

They approached the lobby of the dorm, a sort of rec room with a tv and some couches, and some doors on the other side where people came and went. Sure enough, a couple dudes were playing a video game, a couple girls were sitting across from them chatting with them, and other students passed by, backpacks overloaded with books and laptops. And it was all glowing gold.

Mia and David traded glances, and looked to the four push doors that led out of the building onto the campus. The windows in the doors would normally show the grass, the paths lined with sidewalk, the nearby buildings, several stories high with lots of windows on their walls showing students filing in. University life. Not that David and Mia ever really got into university life, but maybe some day they would have? Except, not anymore.

It didn’t show that. The door windows showed a glowing gold haze, and gold mist dripped from them over the floor, fading out but reaching far enough to touch their feet. It felt warm. It felt nice.

“That, looks a lot like a doorway to the afterlife,” David said, shifting his weight a bit from side to side on the black tile floor.

“Glowing gold doors.”

“Yeap.”

“Sort of on the nose, isn’t it?” she asked.

“Kinda has to be, right? We’re dead, and no one’s showed up to show us what to do?” He gestured to the doors. “So, I mean, looks like we can go through the doors and go to wherever we’re supposed to go after we die. And it wouldn’t be a mistake. Has to be a decision.”

“But it’s blocking our way out.”

He stepped closer to the glowing doors. “Eh, we can go around. Seems like the right and left door don’t go into the light. ”

“Into the light...” She shivered and rubbed her arms. “Maybe some of those out-of-body experiences people have were actually true?”

“Yeah, maybe.” He stepped back from the doors, and looked at her with serious eyes. David usually had a soft expression, until his brain went into think mode. Then it got serious. “Okay, we’re running through this kinda fast. We’ve been dead twenty minutes. Let’s just, stop for a second, and think.”

“Yeah.”

“We have no idea how we died.”

“True.”

“Genetic condition?” he asked.

“I don’t know about any genetic condition that would kill us at the same time.”

“Yeah, me neither. And... and I kinda wanna stick around until we find out what happened.”

She raised a brow. “No one’s gonna check on us until they smell us rotting. You want to stick around long enough to see that?”

“No, but... maybe the killer will return?”

“Assuming the killer’s a dumbass. Assuming we were murdered.”

“Something happened! Something weird. Something very weird.” He looked past her to the doors, frowned, and went back to their dorm room. She followed. She knew she could rely on David to come to a conclusion about something, a smart conclusion, a logical one, once he’d gotten past the initial shock of everything. Dude was always like that, deer in headlights at first, but reliable once he got things to click.

Could he get this to click? The whole being dead thing? Well, it was better than a bunch of screaming and panicking and crying about things lost; they just did that in the shower room, anyway.

“Scene of the crime,” he said as he phased through their door, her behind him. Their bodies were still there, unchanged. “I’m... dead, definitely. If there was any chance I was alive, drowning in my cereal milk finished me off.”

That, was too fucking funny, and she snorted on a chuckle, earning a harsh glare from her brother. She coughed, and stood opposite of him around the small table.

“I’m... definitely dead,” she said, and she forced herself to lean in close and look her body straight in the eyes. Holy fuck that was chilling. “There’s nothing going on in there. She’s not breathing.”

“So we both just... went through a shit load of pain, at the exact same time, for... what, ten seconds? Could barely move. Every limb felt like it was burning off. And then we just died.” David gestured down at the two bodies. “That isn’t normal!”

“So you want to stick around to find out what happened.”

“Yes. Because... there’s just no fucking way this happened. It couldn’t have happened. It’s not possible.”

“Unless?”

David groaned as he walked into the living room, and tried to sit down on the couch. And went through it onto the floor. She snorted on a chuckle again and managed a small smile for him and his head, the only part of him visible, sticking up from the couch cushion.

“Unless what?” he said. “There’s no medical explanation for this, and no criminal one. Like we said, maybe poison, but you started eating before I did. Even if it was poison, we died in seconds, in the exact same way. Poison doesn’t work like that.”

She raised a hand. “Allergic—”

“Nope.”

“Poison in the air?”

“Not a chance.”

“Then...”

He shrugged, shoulders popping up through the couch momentarily. “I don’t know. So all we can do, is sit here, and wait.”

“Wait here, and ignore the stairway to Heaven?”

“Assuming that’s where it’s taking us.”

“Oh come on! Those doors were practically radiating angelic...ness.” She joined him and sat beside him. Two heads, sticking up out of the couch cushions. “We’re not going to Hell.”

“Might not be Heaven or Hell. Could be some other astral plane of... existence.”

“What Dreams May Come sorta deal?”

And for the first time that night, David smiled. A real smile.

“That would be pretty nice. Crafting our own personal Heavens, sharing them with other souls.”

“Right?” She returned his smile, peeked past him back at their bodies, squeezed her eyes shut for a second to try and wipe the memory of her corpse away, and looked back to her brother. “We know what your personal Heaven would be like. Bunch of barely legal busty chicks lying around waiting to get railed by... well I assume you’ll be a giant minotaur or something, with a two-foot-long dick.”

“Maybe not two feet.”

She laughed. “But everything else—”

“Oh definitely.” He grinned at her. “But let me guess. You’d want a bunch of giant sexy buff dudes, or giant sexy buff monsters, fighting each other for the right to pin you down and fuck you, despite your girly little mewls. ‘Oh no, please, don’t, oh please don’t I’m small and frail and you’re so big oh please don’t hurt me mister big bad giant monster with two dicks and a perfect body’.”

Damn it, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“What’s wrong with that fantasy?” she asked.

“You’re too much of a bitch to be the dainty little helpless princess.”

“And you’re too much of a nerd to be a dominant alpha monster.”

“True, true.”

“It’ll be our personal Heavens,” she said. “We can be whatever we want, right? I can be a dainty little helpless princess.”

“You’re already little.”

“Coming from you, that’s rich.”

“Well, like you said, our own personal Heaven. You know, assuming that’s what’s awaiting us. It could be something different entirely.”

“Got some more examples?” she asked.

“An endless plane of cosmic exploration, souls drifting on an ethereal wind, with each breath a millennium.”

“Boring.”

“Yeap.”

David, her fellow head sitting on a couch cushion, shook his head before looking down, smile fading.

“I’m scared to go.”

Sighing, she looked down at her cushion, too.

“I’m scared too, but we’re ghosts. The fuck else are we supposed to do?”

“Find out how we died, and haunt the person who killed us?”

“Assuming—”

“We were killed,” he said. “I know I know. But, let’s just... give it a bit, okay? I have to know. I can’t not know.”

She smiled at him. Yeap, he was in one of his special moods, the kind that didn’t let up until he resolved whatever it was on his mind. It made him hard to deal with sometimes, because it’d full-on stop every other aspect of his life until he did, sometimes even eating and sleeping. And right now, it meant that to him, the idea of leaving before they found out how they died was pretty much impossible.

And truth was, she wasn’t just scared of going through a glowing door into some sort of afterlife. She was terrified. A lot of ghosts probably were. And no way she was going without her brother.

“Alright,” she said. “Let’s stick around until we learn more.”

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~~David~~

Dying sucked. Being a ghost, on the other hand, didn’t suck all that much.

The weird gold glowing doors stuck around. When David walked around them, the outside of the building looked perfectly normal, and instead, the gold glowing portal appeared in other places, as well. Always normal, natural looking, minus the gold glow, always obvious, always in a way David couldn't accidentally walk through it. One of the doors into the Comp Sci building. One of the doors into the Arts building. One of the doors into the nearby Tim Hortons. One of the shower stalls back in the dorms. Whatever it was, wherever it'd go, it was asking them to come, but not forcing them.

It took a few hours of wandering around before Mia and David felt comfortable splitting up. Whatever the afterlife was, it was making it clear David and Mia could leave it whenever they wanted. If it ever came to a point where they obviously had to choose between remaining as ghosts or going into the afterlife, whatever was putting the gold doors everywhere would do something more... loud, hopefully. A giant vortex in the sky, maybe? Whatever it'd be, it'd be obvious, so David and Mia decided to go wandering around on their own for a while.

David found an empty dorm room to sit in for a while, and cried. He was dead. Life was over. Poof, gone, game over. His ghost body produced tears, for some reason, but he didn't mind. They helped him process the emotions better, so he let them flow for a good twenty minutes. It was enough, for now at least, and he turned off the waterworks, recovered, and got back to exploring.

David checked out various faculty rooms, listened to staff talk about shit, and he checked out security as well. No one mentioned the two dead students. No one knew yet. David should have been disappointed, but he wasn't. Once he got past the initial panic and depression, being a ghost was fun. Walking around campus naked was strangely thrilling, and so was spying on people. He'd never spy on people if he was alive, but fuck it, he was dead. Why not?

He spent a few days trying to move things with his mind, or ghost body, but couldn't make it happen. He couldn't make people feel cold. He couldn't so much as stir up a breeze or push a curtain. Frustrating.

He spotted Mia on the campus a couple times, wandering around randomly, and sometimes not so randomly. More than once he saw her either going into or out of the gym, conveniently before or after the basketball team and swim team came and went. Pervert.

He, on the other hand, went back to the dorms and spied on a few women taking showers again. And then checked out some of them in their bedrooms, excited to watch some sexy fun time. Maybe catch them masturbating, or catch some uni student sex?

And he did. And he watched. Because, yeah, ghost. Morality, right out the window. He'd died a virgin, so the least he could do was taint his soul with some harmless voyeurism before 'crossing over'. He deserved it! Right?

Well, either way, the voyeurism was exciting the first couple days. He was even able to get hard and masturbate, which was a surprise, like the tears had been. Unfortunately, the voyeurism, the freedom to be able to see whoever he wanted, whenever, quickly became uninteresting. By day three he just felt sad, and guilty. Sad, because he was dead and he'd never get to indulge in any of the things he was spying on. Guilty, because even as a ghost, he was still spying on people and their private lives, and for some reason his conscience persisted after death. By day four he stopped spying on people all together, except to check if anyone knew about their dead bodies.

He didn't have to ask Mia, it written on her face. She went through the same phases. Super excited by the freedom, morals out the window, overwhelmed like a kid in a candy store. By day four, she was sitting with him on the floor in their dorm, just as sad, just as guilty. And, just as bored.

"I stuck my head in the pool today," she said. "I could breathe just fine."

"Makes sense." He looked to her, and her head sticking up out of the couch cushion, just like his. Sitting inside their couch had become their new routine. "I'm guessing whatever it is that's making our bodies still need to breathe and sleep only cares about other ghostly things." To demonstrate, he covered his mouth and nose with his hand and tried to breathe. He couldn't, and his body wanted to. It still wanted oxygen, for some reason. Except, if they couldn't interact with physical stuff, it couldn't have been the oxygen his lungs wanted.

"Could you stop trying to solve the afterlife like it's some kind of puzzle for a second, Dave?"

"You're the one sticking your head in pools!"

She threw up her hands. "I was curious!"

"So am I!"

"Yeah but you always go too far and turn everything into a spreadsheet."

"Spreadsheets are amazing, and you can't convince me otherwise."

She got up and gestured around them. "Dave. We're dead. The fuck is even the point in trying to solve how any of it works or whatever?"

"I have to know," he said. She couldn't understand. She never did. He had to find out, fit the pieces together, get things to click. Doubly so for figuring out how they died.

“Yeah well, the more you sit here hoping to figure things out, the more we literally rot.” She walked back over to the table with their bodies and gestured at their faces. “Look at this! It’s gross.”

“Yeap.”

“And you’re cool just sitting here, watching us rot?”

“It’s been pretty hot and humid weather lately, right? We’re starting to smell. The bodies, I mean. Someone will come check on us soon.” He hoped. Horrible smells weren’t uncommon in a university dorm.

“Alright,” she said, groaning as she sat down beside him again, disappearing into the couch until only her head was visible. “What will it take for you to be satisfied?”

“An autopsy.”

“Why would they do an autopsy?”

“We died in a super unusual way. They’ll think public health issue, and order an immediate autopsy. You know, when they eventually discover us.”

She groaned, but nodded and pat his shoulder. “Alright. And when the doc says we died of natural causes?”

“Then... yeah, we can... crossover.” The phrase was a thousand times scarier when it applied to him.

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It took nine days before someone finally came to check on them, mostly because of the smell. It was horrific. Not the smell, they couldn’t smell it. But they could see their bodies get worse and worse, and it was the worst nightmare fuel he could ever imagine. Thankfully, despite their new ghost bodies needing to breathe and sleep, they didn’t get hungry or thirsty, or dream. Any dreams right now would have been searingly horrific anyway.

As much as David was a bit curious how the school would react to discovering their bodies, how much the news would spread, would any of his school ‘friends’ care, Mia and David didn’t stick around to find out. They stuck with the bodies. Thankfully their feet were able to stand inside the ambulance that took their corpses to the morgue.

Neither David or Mia looked back at the school as they drove off. They didn't like talking about it very much, but they both knew they wouldn't be missed, by the university or anyone. They didn't have any close friends, and no family. A couple orphans with no one to mourn them.

That was fine. They had each other.

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"This, is fucking terrifying," Mia said, gesturing around at the racks ready to hold some bodies, and cabinets with closed doors, a few of them with name tags indicating they were occupied.

"It's a morgue." He shrugged as he stood beside his body, currently covered in a cloth and waiting for the doctor to finish cleaning up before examining. "Most people find them scary."

"I guess. But, uh, I mean especially now."

"Cause we're ghosts?"

"Cause I keep expecting to run into a ghost!"

He raised a brow. "But... we're ghosts, too."

"Yeah, but maybe we'll run into a scary ghost that kills ghosts, or something, like in the Frighteners? Or maybe a ghost who looks like they did when they died, like in The Sixth Sense? Someone with their face burned off, or—"

"I'm sure there are ghosts around, but apparently we can't see them."

Mia's jaw dropped and her eyes opened wide as she looked around in renewed panic.

"W-What?"

"People die all the time. I haven't seen anyone naked running around, and neither have you. I'm sure there are other ghosts, assuming everyone who dies turns into a ghost, but apparently we can't see them."

"But we can see each other?"

He shrugged. "We died at the same time only a few feet from each other. Might have something to do with it. Or maybe because we know each other, or we're related, or I dunno. Maybe—"

The doctor came over, humming to herself. Don't Fear the Reaper? David laughed, earning a cocked brow from his sister.

"Let's see here," the doctor said, a short woman, portly, dark skin. He couldn't see much of her expression with her mask on, but she gave him mom vibes. She pulled the sheet off his decomposing body, pulled out her scalpel, and got to work.

"David," Mia said. "What're you doing?"

"Watching?"

"It's an autopsy!"

"Exactly. You're not curious?"

"No!"

"You don't want to know—"

She threw up her hands, her classic 'let me emotionally process this' action. The one time he'd told her that's what she was doing and that it was unnecessary, she'd thrown her hands up, and shoved him. She'd apologized. And then he'd asked if she was on her period — purely from academic curiosity — only to get kicked. They were thirteen, just idiot kids. It was one of his first memories of his sister and him becoming different people, and not just brother and sister.

"I want to know how I died, yes," she said. "I'm not interested in seeing my insides on my outside, or anyone's."

He smiled at her.

"Don't give me that look, David."

"It's just a body. It's not me."

"It was you!"

He shrugged, shaking his head. "I'm me. This was me. It's not anymore."

"You take intellectualizing a little far, you know?"

"Big word. Learn that in Psych 201?"

She glared at him. Uh oh, that may have been a bit too far. Maybe seeing her body on the other table about to get cut open, really was freaking her out.

But the pathologist was doing David first, and he was not going to miss this. He watched closely as the doctor pulled the cloth off David's body.

"Subject is nineteen years old. Five feet tall, five inches. One hundred and sixty-five centimeters. Red hair, several inches long, freckles, pale skin. About one week of decomposition in humid warm weather." The pathologist peeled back his already half open eyelids. David watched. "Green eyes." The doctor talked louder than someone talking to themselves would. She was recording her voice. A quick peek over at the monitor on the nearby desk showed it was also writing out her words. Speech to text, nice. "Lean and thin, low bodyfat, and muscular for his size. Deceased was athletic."

David grinned at Mia. She rolled her eyes. The doc would say the same thing about her too, once it was her turn.

"Deceased looks to be in great health, with no signs of external trauma." The doctor paused. "Hmm. Genital pubic hair trimmed. Sexually active? Note: contact the school for potential sexually transmitted hazard."

David groaned and looked at Mia. She groaned too, and rolled her eyes again. The doc would, again, say the same thing about her, and get it wrong again.

The doctor continued, taking notes as she analyzed David's body. Things got exciting when she took out a scalpel.

"Oh jesus christ." Mia covered her eyes and looked away.

David watched intently as the pathologist ran the scalpel down his body, and dissected him. And that's all it was, a dissection. He wasn't in there anymore, and spending over a week as a ghost wandering around the campus and beyond, naked and ignored, had sealed that in well; plus the panic period once it'd really sunk in, but he was past that now, hopefully.

"No signs of internal trauma. No signs of unusual decay. Organs seem in good health. No obvious cause of death." The doctor went on, listing off all the ways David shouldn't be dead, but was, but also crossing off probable diseases. Slowly but surely, the doctor relaxed, apparently no longer thinking David's body was a bio hazard.

Which David was worried about. Mia didn't know how long a pathology result would take. David did.

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~~Day 16~~

One week later, the pathology results came back. About time, because David was one day away from dying again, Mia's ghost hands wrapped around his ghost throat. He didn't dare tell her they got lucky and the doc ordered a priority test, fearing a bio hazard issue. It could have taken almost a month.

"All results negative." The doc sighed as she shook her head, standing beside David's body. Sixteen days of being dead made him look pretty damn gaunt and gross. David didn't mind, but Mia couldn't look. "First time I've been stumped in a long time. The school reports no health issues anywhere. They've checked their water. They've checked the food these poor kids were eating, if you can call it food. They've checked the air filters. They checked the plates for any traces of a toxic chemical. Nothing. Even their brains looked perfectly fine, no tumors, nothing. And with no family history, no family of any kind to look into, I have no choice but to consider this a death by unknown natural causes."

David winced. He winced harder when Mia punched him in the shoulder.

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The two of them sat on the curb outside the morgue, middle of the night, and watched the traffic go by. Not a busy part of the city, and it was the middle of the night, in Canada. There was no traffic.

"Satisfied?" Mia asked, gesturing back behind them toward the morgue with a hand flick. "Two weeks."

"Sixteen days."

"Shut up. Christ, I can't believe I waited."

David gestured to the building across the street, a clothing store, with its glowing gold door inviting them to come into its warm embrace.

"You really didn't want to know how we died? You could have left any time."

"I wanted to know, but when the doc said there wasn't anything obvious, I was cool to leave," she said.

"Then—"

“I wasn’t going to leave my brother!”

Sighing, he smiled at her and gave her a small nudge with his shoulder. “Thanks.”

“Yeah, well, I was also terrified of doing this alone.”

“Likewise.”

“So... what do we do?”

He gestured across the dark street to the glowing door. “We work up the courage, and cross the threshold into a new world we know nothing about, unable to return.”

“Fuck me, you couldn’t say that in a nicer way? A more optimistic way?”

“Sorry. Uh... we’ll... be going to Heaven.”

“We’re atheists.”

He shook his head. “Speak for yourself. I’m agnostic.”

“Just a pussy atheist.”

Laughing, he stood up, and held out his hand to her. “I don’t think whatever’s waiting for us through that door is a horrible place, Mia. It doesn’t feel horrible.”

She grabbed his hand and stood up, eyes locked on the glowing door waiting for them.

“Could be a trick, by some cosmic horror thing, you know? Like, an angler fish that feeds on souls.”

He stared at her. “Uh... what?”

“Just, something I read.”

“Stop reading scary stuff. You’re like one of those women who listens to crime podcasts to fall asleep.”

“I’ve only done that twice,” she said, scrunching up her nose.

“Lies. At this point, I’m sure you could not only successfully get away with murder, but you’d enjoy it.”

“Lies!” She punched him in the shoulder again in that weak way she did when she was nervous, and squeezed his hand. “Convince me to go.”

“Alright. Like I said, it doesn’t feel horrible. It feels nice. It feels... welcoming, right?” He pulled her toward the glowing door. A car drove by, and cut through them. They didn’t react. Sixteen days of wandering around the world as a ghost desensitized them quite a bit.

“It does. Feels warm.”

“Feels like... like...”

She squeezed his hand tighter. “Home?”

He squeezed her hand tighter. “Does it? Feel like a home?”

“No idea. I’d always hoped it’d feel like this.”

“I guess... I guess I did, too.”

David and Mia talked about everything. From the music and movies they liked, to their weird sexual interests. They talked about the things and the people they hated. They talked about school shit, and the friends they’d made but could never keep.

They didn’t talk about home, and the lack thereof.

He stared at the glowing yellow door leading into Clyde and Martha’s clothing store. There was a bar down the street called The Last Night, which would have fit so much better, but whoever was putting the gold doors everywhere didn’t seem to care about that perfect opportunity. So, Clyde and Martha’s clothing store it was.

They came closer, and squeezed each other’s hands tighter as the glowing gold aura enveloped them. The door was still closed, but they were close enough to touch it, close enough all they had to do was reach out and push it open, assuming they could touch it at all. He didn’t touch it yet, neither did Mia, and the two of them stood in the glow as it buried them in the strangest, most inviting, delightful, relaxing sensation he’d ever felt. And he knew Mia felt the same.

She was right. It felt like coming home to a warm fire, with a family, and a nice bowl of porridge with bananas and brown sugar waiting; or sugar cereal, even better. Or, it was how he always imagined that sensation in the stories he read. Shitty, juvenile stories about people who get lost in the woods and stuff, and manage to find their way home after a hard journey. A guilty pleasure, and he knew Mia read those stories, too.

“So, uh...” He gulped, and peeked down at his sis. “Wanna open it?”

“You want me to do it?”

“You’re better at this sorta stuff.”

“What?” she asked. “Opening doors?”

“Being brave.”

She sucked in a harsh breath. “Bullshit. I still can’t squash a spider.”

“You yelled at that cashier when he double charged you a few months ago. Doesn’t get much braver than that.”

After a weak chuckle, she took a deeper, better breath, and nodded.

“Alright.”

Mia reached out, and pushed open the door.

More gold washed over them, warm, inviting, something that soothed his ghost muscles until he almost fell asleep standing up. But no, it wasn’t a need to sleep that pulled him. It was the deep warmth that told him everything would be alright, that everything would be right and whole and make sense if he just walked forward, and left all his burdens behind.

Mia took a step forward, her hand in his, and he followed.

The gold light parted, showing a stairway of pure white marble, hundreds of feet wide and shallow, easy to climb. To the left, endless clouds, laced with flowing gold waves that dripped and poured over puffy edges that looked more like cotton pads than clouds. To the right, same thing.

They weren’t alone. Other naked people walked up the stairs, eyes wide and looking around, struck with awe, same as the two of them. No one cared about the nudity. Everyone was too mesmerized, confused, and being drawn in by the warmth that told them to go up the stairs. Up, and up, to the giant golden gates waiting for them.

David and Mia both looked up and froze.

It was Heaven. The stairs, the clouds, the gold gates, yeah sure that definitely painted the image of Heaven, but it was the colossal floating islands above that convinced him. Enormous islands, hovering, the undersides titanic planes of cloud, topped with gold cities. Even from miles and miles away, he could tell they were giant, big enough to house millions and millions of people.

Mia squeezed his hand, and they walked up the stairs more. It looked like there were thousands upon thousands of steps ahead of them, but each step they took somehow took them up a thousand steps seamlessly. It’d take them no time at all to reach the golden gates at the top.

Mia stopped, forcing David to stop on the next step.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing, I just... Sir!” Mia waved a hand at two people walking up next to them. “Hey, you look like you speak English.”

The man was definitely an older gent, probably in his eighties, likely dead to old age or cancer. He smiled at Mia, and to his credit, he didn't even glance down at her naked body. No one cared about anyone's nudity here. No one could, with the gold aura flowing down the stairs filling everyone — David assumed — with the strange warmth that told them to relax, and be welcome.

“Yes young lady?”

“Hi, hi... hi. I um, I just... wanted to know if you know anything... about this?” She gestured around at the endless clouds, the floating islands in the distance, and the golden gate at the top of the stairs.

The man blinked at her, before donning a warm smile.

“Lady, my legs feel good.”

“I'm sorry?”

“My legs.” He gave his old, brittle-looking legs a slap. “My legs feel good! I spent the past ten years unable to walk. Legs couldn't take it. But I'm walking now. I feel good, now. What possible reason could there be for an old fart like me, to be walking up some white stairs, surrounded by white clouds, with golden mist pouring over us?”

“We're dead.”

He shook his head. “Seems to me like we're just heading into a new phase of life. A pretty good one, by the feel of it.” With a playful, classic, silently wise pat on her shoulder, the old man winked, and started up the stairs again.

“Was that necessary?” David asked her.

“Just doing what you do. Gathering intel.”

“I uh, I think even I'm satisfied, Mia. We're walking up the stairway to Heaven.”

She groaned and ran her fingers through her long red hair. “So much for being an atheist.”

He chuckled. Much as he tried to make it sound natural, it sounded nervous as hell, and he held out his hand again for her. No way he was walking up these stairs without his sister.

She took it.

The closer they got to the top, the more things came into view, distant objects growing sharper, and more people joined them on the stairs. People faded into view calmly and smoothly, never a jump scare, even when someone faded into view right in front or beside him. More, and more people, until at least a thousand surrounded them.

David hated crowds, and he knew Mia did, too. Maybe not as much as him, but the two of them avoided crowds like the plague. This didn't feel like a crowd. Everyone around him was someone, someone he could care for, someone he could love, someone he could ignore or walk away from if desired and not be bothered or judged for it. There were no strangers here. The glowing light told him everyone here was trustworthy, and there was no need for the mental barriers he usually put up to guard himself from others and their words.

One look at Mia told him she was feeling the same thing. No one, including them, tried to avoid touching shoulders with the others as they climbed the stairs. It didn't feel bad, or weird or strange or cringe, to suddenly touch skin on skin with the strangers they walked with. No one minded.

There were plenty of young people, some way too young, but most of the people on the stairs were old. Everyone was smiling. The kids didn't seem to understand the gravity of what was happening, and many ran up the stairs giggling and hopping around. The elderly definitely understood, and they giggled and hopped around, too, many standing up straighter than necessary, just because they could, for the first time in a long time; they couldn't help but tell David that as they walked past.

David looked up again, to the sky. Or were they above the sky, looking up into space? That didn't make any sense. Heaven or whatever this place was wasn't a physical location in the universe, right? And yet, they were surrounded by clouds, with more below them than above. The higher they climbed the stairs, the more they left the clouds behind, and the more the endless sky of the cosmos revealed itself.

Except, it wasn't a sky he recognized.

"What the fuck," Mia whispered, staring up.

"Yeah."

The giant floating islands still blocked a lot of his view, along with other clouds higher up, but much of the sky opened as they climbed, and showed distant stars. And nebulae. And swirling galaxies. It looked less like outer space, and more like an artist's representation of it, exaggerated and alive with motion. Like, having the aurora borealis in your kitchen.

“Wow,” Mia said.

“Yeah.”

They continued. As much as the floating islands and their gold cities, and the cosmic infinite above were hypnotizing, the golden gates ahead of them grew closer and closer. And they were huge. He'd thought they might have been fifty feet high at a distance, but as they got closer, he had to change his guess to five hundred feet, and more. Towering gates of gold, vertical bars thicker than skyscrapers and reaching just as high. The closer they got, the more details came in, ornate carvings on the giant metal, letters or maybe runes he didn't recognize. And thousands upon thousands of statues and carvings in the metal, too, angel wings and shields and swords, arranged in symmetrical patterns on the glorious display.

As the white stairs approached the colossal gates, soon the souls — no point in denying it, they were souls — weren't the only ones there. Angels awaited them. At first, dozens, then hundreds, then thousands. Classic angels to his surprise, men and women standing six to seven feet tall, sometimes taller, with enormous wings of white feather at their backs, and each wearing silver and gold armor straight out of a medieval fantasy.

The glorious beings stood along the outer edges of the stairs, each with a giant spear in their right hand, and a five-foot shield in their left, the base of it resting on the stairs. Their helmets had a T slit, exposing their eyes, nose, and mouth, and Mia and David both stared as they drifted toward the right side of the stairs to get closer looks at their faces. Those, were gorgeous faces. Really gorgeous faces. Each second angel was male or female, the women usually slightly shorter and slender than their male counterparts, but every one of them was utterly beautiful.

And they smiled. Calm, patient, welcoming smiles, with vibrant eyes that struck him still. Brown eyes? No, not quite. More like... a brown mineral? Like a pretty brown stone, the kind with different shades and white lines in them. Others had green eyes like his own, but again, green just didn't fit. Emerald. Blue? No, lapis. Red? No, ruby. Intricate, powerful colors, that left him and Mia staring at them.

“Um, hi,” Mia said, approaching one of the angels, David in tow. “I uh... um...”

“Welcome,” the woman angel said, a black woman with eyes so powerful they almost glowed. Amber? “Rest in peace.”

“Rest in peace?” Mia gulped and stared up at David. “That's ominous.”

The angel's smile did not waver, but she did chuckle, a quiet, but deep and warm sound. It matched the warmth of the stairway to Heaven perfectly.

"You are welcome here, in Heaven," the angel said. "Come, and rest in peace."

"We're welcome?" David asked. "I thought we'd have to be judged or something."

"You have been judged. Heaven would not have opened herself to you otherwise."

Oh thank God. Literally, apparently. Both Mia and David breathed deep, with heavy sighs as relaxation coursed through them. They weren't climbing the stairs just to get judged and tossed into some dimension of eternal torture.

"The... gold light doors we kept finding?" he asked. "And... her?" Was Heaven a woman? Nah, probably a metaphor, like a ship.

The angel nodded, amber eyes staring into his soul. Beautiful, and warm, but also terrifying. Those weren't human eyes, and eye contact was more than enough to warn him this woman was powerful, and ancient. He didn't know how he knew. He just knew.

"She has welcomed you, and opened herself to you."

"Sounds sexual," Mia said, snickering slightly before coughing and standing up straight. "Sorry, I—"

"Do not be sorry. You will have no need for guilt or shame or regret here. Heaven believes you belong here, with all your quirks and desires intact."

David smiled. He couldn't help it, this angel was so perfectly direct.

"And if... Heaven hadn't wanted us?" Mia asked.

The angel sighed and shook her head. "Then no golden door would have come to you. Hell herself would have reached up and fought to rip your souls from the In Between."

Mia and David looked at each other, and gulped. That sounded horrifying. Dying and finding gold doors everywhere inviting them to enter had been scary, but what the angel said made it sound like Hell would have come at them, chased them, and pulled them down. He couldn't help but imagine a closet door swinging open behind them, filled with fire and bones, with demon hands reaching out and trying to pull them into a world of endless pain.

"Scary," Mia said.

“Indeed. But you are safe here in the warmth of Heaven’s embrace.” Nodding again, the angel gestured up toward the gold gates waiting for them. “Go, be blessed with new bodies, and enjoy the light and waters of Heaven for as long as you desire.”

“New bodies?” David asked.

The angel grinned, a little playfully at that, but didn’t answer.

David and Mia looked at each other, shrugged, and started the climb again. More and more angels waited, a line of armored bodies with magnificent wings, all of them standing guard, but not as emotionless statues. Now that David and Mia walked near the angels on the right side, they couldn’t help but look at them, meet their eyes, and scan them for any sort of hint about what was going to happen. Nothing. The angels gave nothing away, except that they were all ridiculously handsome. Absurdly, almost disturbingly beautiful, and sexy. And tall. David and Mia paused to stare at a few more than once, and from the looks the angels gave them in return, they were used to it, and didn’t mind. One of them winked. One of them frowned. Okay, so, most of them were friendly, but not all. Good to know.

They got closer, and closer, and squeezed each other’s hand harder as the stairs tapered off into a flat path, and the giant gates of Heaven waited for them. While the armored angels with giant shields and spears remained, there were angels closer to the gate in different clothes. Still in armor, but the armor was lighter, showing bits of white silk hanging from between the joints, and their helmets left their faces completely exposed.

He thought the angels lining the stairway were beautiful. These new angels, still just as tall and fit as the other angels, were ridiculous. Not all of them wore armor, either, some of them apparently happy to be wearing simple silk white robes and sandals, showing dozens of gold bracelets, necklaces, stomach chains, ankle bracelets, rings, and even gold tattoos. Compared to the insane majesty of the gold gate, the angels and their bling looked subtle and tasteful. And their robes did absolutely nothing to hide their curves. Yeah, the men had Mia staring and borderline drooling, and the women had David doing the same. That, was a lot of muscles, slim waists, and enormous breasts, and their robes showed off a lot of it. No bare breasts, but considering the silk was borderline see-through, nothing was left to the imagination.

He was going to like it here.

While all the angels seemed to look basically like extremely tall humans who’d all won the genetic lottery on beauty and fitness, there was one angel who did not fit the bill. And unlike the other angels, this one was straight-up terrifying and made no efforts to suggest otherwise. They stood at the center of the stairs in front of the gate, behind a huge pulpit of white marble and gold metal. They held a

massive sword with both hands in front of them with its tip against the floor, and their helmet hid their face in shadow save for two glowing gold eyes.

But the biggest difference was the size, and the wings. Whoever this juggernaut of an angel was, they — he couldn't see any sex-defining features — were twelve feet tall, and they had six wings. Six giant wings that somehow fit together perfectly against their armored back. Looking at this angel felt less like looking at an angelic being of beauty and grace, and more like like some sort of titan guardian, ready to awaken the moment someone stepped out of line. Thankfully they didn't so much as breathe as Mia and David walked by.

The gates weren't open, but the titanic gold bars were more than wide enough for a dozen people to walk through shoulder to shoulder. Beyond the gate, more of the unarmored angels waited, and they held white robes in their hands. Each person that walked between the bars and past the gate, to the stairway beyond, received a white robe from one of the angels. And each time someone put one on, they changed.

The old man Mia and David had been talking to put on the robe, and when he turned to look back at the two of them, his eyes opened wide as a glowing gold enveloped him. It passed quickly, and Dave rubbed his eyes as he stared at the man. Same man, but different. Younger. Healthier. His hair had color again, and he had plenty of muscle, too. In fact, he looked healthier than David guessed the man did when he was alive and in his prime.

A woman put on the robe, and the same thing happened. And sure enough, the changes to her body weren't simply repairing damage and making her young. She grew two cup sizes.

David and Mia watched more souls pass through the bars into Heaven, and listened to their joyous cheers as they realized what'd happened to them. Many of them burst into a run, and sprinted up the stairs that opened up overhead into spiraling paths. Archways, gorgeous and complex sprawled overhead, connecting to the stairs and becoming bridges. No railings. Everything was about the glorious architecture, flowing lines of gold that curled and bounced off the white marble. It reminded David of elf architecture in movies and RPGs and stuff. Except this all led up and up into the air, and the gold cities that his brain could not begin to understand. Their scale was insane. He'd have to get up there to even begin to figure out how big Heaven was.

“Those robes make me think I'm joining some sorta Greek... nun, celibate cult,” Mia whispered. “I—whoa.” Both Mia and David froze for a second when a nearby angel turned around to face them. A man this time, white, wearing only a skirt and a loincloth; visible through the silk skirt. David was

straight, but that was a gorgeous man. A gorgeous man with gold nipple piercings that, somehow, fit his silk white clothes perfectly.

“I think you’ll be quite surprised,” the angel said.

“I will? I uh...” Mia gestured to the gate ahead, and one of the souls getting their robe. “The robe, and the new body. It... It’s covering up the body, and—”

The angel laughed and winked at her, a little more than flirtatiously.

“It is ceremonious only, but it helps them internalize that they have been reborn in their new prime bodies.”

“Prime?”

“A body that reflects your deepest desires for beauty.” The angel’s grin was positively evil. “I am sure you can imagine the sorts of changes most men and women wish for.”

Well. Hot damn. Giant penis? Please, please giant penis.

His sister raised a brow as she gestured to the closest newly clothed soul, just beyond the gate.

“But, it’s uh, kinda giving me... um... It’s very conservative, and—”

The angel leaned in close, making Mia go from frozen to petrified.

“I can see the look in your eyes, young soul. Don’t worry. Heaven and its angels will satisfy your desires.” He grinned as he stepped back, and gestured to the gate with one of his enormous wings. “Speak with the other gabriem once you have decided upon which holy island you wish to stay. My kind will gladly share nights in your bed with you. As often as you desire. As many as you desire.”

“As many as...” Mia slowly turned her head, going full owl mode as she looked back at David, eyes super wide.

David threw up a hand. “Me too? With women, I mean? Women angels?”

The angel — a gabriem apparently, whatever that was — laughed and nodded at David.

“You two are a quite a bit more comfortable approaching this topic than most new souls.”

“He’s a pervert,” Mia said. It wasn’t the first time their attempts to usurp the other as the ‘most perverted’ were quickly flipped to trying to prove the other was more perverted, when in public. Game on.

“Oh we’re having this conversation again? I don’t have a closet full of toys and—”

“Hey, hey! I’m not the one who needs bleach to wipe his browser history.”

“Like yours is any better, and—”

The angel laughed louder. It was a great sound.

“You two have heart. I’m sure you’ll avail yourselves of Heaven’s sanctums sooner than most.”

“Sanctums?” David asked.

“Yes. Heaven has many ways to entertain the souls of the Great Tower. I don’t want to spoil things so soon, but for a couple of sexually hungry souls like yourselves, if the angels or other souls can’t satisfy you, the sanctums will.”

David blinked, looked past the man to one of the angels waiting beyond the gate, and stared. A woman, almost seven feet tall, with breasts barely contained inside a silk X strap across her chest, each bigger than her own head. Like, giant pillows. She was laughing as she set a robe on a new soul, and guided them up to the stairs to the glowing cities of gold awaiting them. Such a lovely voice.

David raised his hand again. “We can just—”

“Yes,” the male angel said. “Yes, you can. The gabriem can’t be everywhere at once, but we try, and what we can’t manage, the sanctums can.”

“So I could—”

“Yes, as I said. If you wanted to sleep with four or five or a dozen gabriem tonight, new soul, we would find a way to make it happen.”

While still staring at the gate and beyond, David lowered his hand and aimed his palm at Mia. Without looking, she gave him a high five.

“We can just... walk in?” Mia asked.

“Yes. Go, enjoy yourselves. There is no time limit, of any kind. Rest in peace.”

David and Mia squeezed hands, nodded at each other, and walked toward the colossal gate. He had a million questions. Why was it a gate, and why was it closed? How did Heaven know it wanted them, or anyone else? How were people judged? Who the fuck was the giant angel watching everyone like a sentinel waiting to shoot lasers out of their eyes? What was a gabriem? What were the differences between the islands? How many islands? Too many questions!

But he didn't ask them. After forcing his sis to wait sixteen days, all for a question they didn't get answered, she'd kill him — somehow — if he forced her to wait anymore. And he knew she wouldn't go without him. He wouldn't go without her.

They walked up to the gate, and smiled at the two gabriem waiting for them just beyond the bars.

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~~Mia~~

They both fell back on their butts and clutched their noses, as they ran into an invisible wall.

“Fuck!” David yelled, lying on his ass on the white marble floor, hands over his face.

“Ow!” Mia said, groaning and rolling around before getting to her feet. “What the fuck? What—” Her ghost mouth went dry, and her body froze, as she looked around at the angels.

All of them, hundreds upon hundreds of them, stared at her and David, and all of them slowly drew their weapons. They looked stunned, and confused. Even the angel Mia had been talking to stepped back, eyes wide. He didn't know what was happening. None of them did.

“Not... again,” the angel said, mouth dropping open.

“Again?” Mia got up, helped David up, and did her best to not pee herself as everyone stared. She hadn't peed in two weeks, but if she could, she might have, with every angel pointing their weapons at her and David, including the colossal angel with the six wings.

“What's going on?” David asked. “Why can't we—”

A roaring, screeching sound buried them all. The angels didn't react, but each human soul staring at them, also confused, covered their ears as the sound thundered. It sounded like an air raid siren, if blasted by a thousand trumpets.

“What'd we do?” Mia asked. “What'd we do!? We... We just got here. What's going on? I—” She gave up. The other souls couldn't hear her over the siren, and if the angels could, they didn't respond. Instead, the angels came in closer, giant shields up and spears pointed at them, enormous wings spread and blocking off the human souls.

They were blocking the other souls from getting close to David and Mia?

The juggernaut lifted their sword and pointed it at the two of them. Face still hidden in the unnatural shadow of their helmet, only their golden eyes cut through the darkness, and they stared at David and Mia with intensity she hadn't known since the time her second guardian had caught her drawing on the walls with crayon. They didn't approach.

"Do not move," they said, voice a booming, rolling wave of alien bass.

"Don't move?" Gulping, she looked to David beside her, but he was clamming up like he always did when put in an awkward situation. That evidently included horrifying situations, and she couldn't blame him. "But we didn't—"

The sky erupted. High above, gold light shot down around them, and both Dave and Mia covered their eyes as best they could against the near-scalding beams of pure sun. They burned, and Mia and Dave pressed their backs together as the pillars of scorching light moved in closer and closer, trapping them like prison bars. The nearby humans ran, screaming, diving onto their stomachs and covering their heads as if a nuke was about to hit.

"Someone! Please!" Mia threw up her hands and kept them there. "Someone please tell me what's going on? What'd we do? Please, we just got here, and... and... Please!" She made sure to scream loud enough she knew someone heard her, but while the angels flinched at her voice, they continued to stare at her with the same confusion plastered on their faces she knew she had. How could the angels not know what was happening?

David grabbed her hand again and squeezed. All she could do was squeeze back, as the pillars of light, striking down at them from miles and miles above, closed in on them, each as thick as a person, each radiating waves of heat.

The floor opened up. Mia and David managed to look down fast enough to see the white marble split open under them, and expose a tunnel glowing with red and lined with sharp stones, before gravity pulled them down. The golden gate, the angels, the beams of light, the stairs, the clouds, it all vanished. The warmth, the calmness, the safety, the inviting aura telling them they were home, it was all gone in an instant.

The hole overhead closed as fast as it opened, leaving David and Mia in darkness as they fell, and fell, and fell. She screamed, and David screamed seconds later, as the endless hole swallowed them. Hot wind cut against their skin, and she looked at her naked body to double check it wasn't literally cutting her. The walls were covered in spiky shards of dark stone, and she pulled her arms in as the air spun her and David around. They managed to keep their bodies pointed down, still holding each other's hands, still screaming as the glowing red light below grew brighter.

She stopped screaming, fully intent on taking a breath and screaming more, and she heard David pause too, but the screaming continued anyway. Echo? No, it wasn't their screams. The air was screaming. The wind was screaming. The tunnel was screaming.

She tried to look to David, but she couldn't tear her eyes away from the tunnel dragging them down and down. The walls reached out for them, and Mia shrieked as she yanked her hand in. Everything was a blurry mess as the scorching hair singed her skin and burned her eyes, but through the tears, she knew the walls had reached out for her. And the walls were screaming.

Hands. Thousands of hands. Fingers broken and bloody reached out from the walls on arms bent and ruined. Ripped bodies, torn flesh, gaunt skin and visible bone. Torsos reached out from the tunnel wall, naked and dying, bodies lodged inside the stone and metal spikes. Their eyes were wide with mania, mouths wider with split lips and shattered teeth. But they swung their arms out for David and Mia with the energy and hunger of desperate lunatics who could save their lives if they somehow caught the people falling down the tunnel.

Black spikes pointed toward the tunnel's center, accepting David and Mia like the mouth of a lamprey, but the walls spread out the further they fell, until the spikes and the screaming bodies between them couldn't reach her. Mia screamed again as movement finally drew her eyes away from the red and black below, to another body beside her. Another falling body, an old woman, emaciated and screeching. More joined them, young, old, phasing into existence below and above Mia, all of them naked, all of them wailing like banshees.

David pulled Mia in closer.

"Hold on," he yelled. He'd stopped screaming. She managed to look at him, almost expecting to see his face suddenly valiant with newfound courage. No. He was horrified. His eyes were just as wide as the people growing out of the walls and its teeth, and despite the hurricane winds crashing against her, she could feel his body trembling in her grip.

More and more people surrounded them. No children. Everyone who joined Mia and David, plummeting into the endless darkness and encroaching fire, was an adult. Somehow in the insanity, that's what her mind latched onto, that everyone who fell with her was as old or older than her. A lot of people, a lot of old people, falling into oblivion.

The tunnel opened wider and wider, and more people joined them, until at least a couple hundred souls surrounded Mia and David. The deeper they fell into the dark tunnel, the louder it got, the distant walls and their screams disappearing underneath a groaning howl that turned into a roar. She'd heard that roar before, in movies, when people worked an oversized furnace melting metal and burning wood.

The blackness disappeared in an explosion of fire, and everything erupted in amber light. The walls weren't just rock, spikes, and screaming bodies reaching out for them anymore. The walls were on fire, and dripping with something her eyes told her was lava. It made no sense. None of this made any sense.

Fire and scorching heat flicked against her skin, burning, making her eyes want to close. But she couldn't close them. They were just as petrified as the rest of her.

A gate waited below them, a giant circle of black metal. The closer they grew, the more colossal its size became, like the gates of Heaven, too big to wrap her mind around. Stone, metal, a huge circle at the end of the tunnel lined with a million skulls, each bleeding from their empty eye sockets.

She wanted to scream again, but all she could do was cry. Paralyzing waves of roaring bass vibrated through her as she passed through the titanic ring of metal and death, into an endlessness of swirling red.

Fire. They were falling into fire. She pulled David in closer until they were half hugging each other, half staring down into the flames that surrounded them. It burned, but it didn't burn away the skin, not close enough to set her on fire. And the roaring wind sizzled and crackled, like she'd stuck her head in a bonfire.

She managed to look up. The ring of metal hovered in the sky, and more people fell through it, tiny dots compared to the huge circle. Hundreds. Thousands, falling through the ring into the fire and air below, all of them screaming like a tortured choir.

Below her, the fire broke away, and she sucked in a breath as ground came into view. They weren't going to fall for forever. The ground was going to catch them, and end everything.

The ring above closed with a roaring shriek, shrinking on itself before vanishing in an explosion of swirling red that blended into the sky of flame. A tunnel of stone, metal, blood, and screaming bodies, had opened up, pulled David and Mia out from the gates of Heaven, and dropped them off in fire and misery. It'd dropped them in off Hell.

The wind no longer burned, and she found enough air to breathe normally as she free-fell toward the red world below. The portal hadn't opened up high enough for her to see the whole land, and the literally burning sky had blocked a lot of her view, but whatever land they were about to land on and splatter into a stain against, seemed to be a giant island, surrounded by a red ocean. Mountains of dark rock dotted the nearby landscape, jagged and cruel, many of them erupting with splatters of glowing amber; more lava. Lines of red cut through the land like veins. Red rivers?

She managed to tear her eyes away from the land coming up underneath her, and looked out to the distance. It wasn't a normal island. There was something in the center, water, but dark instead of red, a sea in the middle of the land. The land changed the further she looked out, a lot. In one direction around the donut island, the land turned black and the giant mountains tapered off. Past that, a giant white mountain cut through the land, covered in smooth bumps and ridges some part of her brain told her was bone the size of cities, but that wasn't possible. In the other direction, the land cut deep into itself, turning dark like the other side, before breaking way into a ravine that made the Grand Canyon look tiny. And again, something about it looked all too much like flesh and skin.

David's squeezing hand yanked her attention back to the ground that was going to kill her. They were falling toward one of the red rivers that cut between the jagged mountains, but even if they landed in the water, or blood if that's what it was, they'd still die instantly. If that was something they could even do in Hell. The long fall was giving her more than enough time to imagine the endless, eternal tortures that waited for her. Dying would be a mercy.

"We're slowing down!" he yelled.

"What!?"

"We're slowing down!" He gestured out with his free hand to the distant mountains. He was right. Their sharp tips and amber veins passed more and more slowly, and the air smashing into their naked skin eventually softened to a harsh wind. Eventually she could look around without losing everything under the blurs of tears.

What were those things, moving below? Tiny red and black dots getting closer and closer.

The red water below was still coming up to greet them though, and from the screams of the other people hitting the surface, it wasn't gentle. She looked to David, and he pulled her into him, hard. Before she could understand, David wrapped his arms around her, pinned her chest against his chest, and rolled.

Impact. Wet. Her eyes closed in reflex as the red water swallowed her and David, and her body screamed with the sudden stop. They had slowed before impact, but that didn't stop it from feeling like she'd slammed her head into an airbag after driving her car off a bridge into a river.

No, not an airbag. David's chest. He'd protected her from the impact.

Once the red water swallowed them, David let go.

She tried to scream his name, but the warm water flooded her mouth. She tried to squeeze his hand, but it was gone. She swung her hands out aimlessly in the water, trying to find him. He was gone.

Her head broke through the surface, and she screamed out as she looked around.

“David! David! Dav—”

Roaring and shrieking buried her face, and she snapped her head about as splashing water erupted around her. The water moved slowly, but it churned in a mess as hundreds of bodies fell in the river. She ducked under the water as more souls crashed into the red, and she swam toward the closest shore. If she stayed, she’d get crushed. She had to get to the shore and find David.

Once her feet found shallow water and she managed to stand up, she froze again. Not all the roaring and shrieking had come from the other souls landing in the river. Some of it came from the demons rushing down toward her.

She didn’t know how she knew they were demons so quickly. She should have been in shock. She probably was. But the creatures coming down to greet the new souls with evil smiles and sharp teeth were so obviously demons, she almost laughed. Many of them ran on raptor feet, others on hooves. Some of them had wings, most didn’t. Most of them had giant black horns coming out of their black and red skin, some didn’t. They were all sort of humanoid, but also not, some leaning forward and running more like dinosaurs out of Jurassic Park, complete with long tails. A few of them ran on all fours, but switched to two once they got in the water.

Black eyes. They all had black eyes, with red irises. And they all looked hungry.

Other humans had come up onto the shore before her. The first to die. The demons poured over them and roared like lions as they ripped into the people. Blood gushed from wounds and flowed into the red river, squirting out of shoulders where arms were ripped off, and from necks where heads were severed. Some of the demons had swords, horrible slabs of black metal that looked scrap beaten together. Most demons were content to use their claws to shred the screaming, panicking, scattering humans into bits. The others half cut, half sawed through the people with their half blunt weapons.

“David,” she whispered to no one, gulping as she found herself enough to look around. David, where was David. She had to find David. She tried to turn around, maybe dive back into the water, find her brother, and swim them to safety. But she couldn’t move. Surrounded by screaming, roaring, death, blood, and body parts that fell into the water to drift with the gentle flow, all she could do was stand there and look around dumbly.

She was going to die.

One of the demons came up to her, grinning, sword in hand. This one was eight feet tall, raptor feet disappearing in the red water as he walked toward her, his muscular, masculine body leaning

forward slightly, a big tail behind him slithering left and right. He wore armor, chunks of dark metal bent into shape to fit various body parts. A shoulder, a leg, one arm, and one side of his chest. Opposite of the dented metal chunks, the demon wore skulls, one huge one attached to his other shoulder, giant black horns coming out of its white bone. From his waist, he had half a dozen human skulls dangling from chains.

He lifted his sword. She didn't move. His smile grew wider, exposing sharp white teeth. She didn't move. He came close enough she felt the heat of his breath as he aimed and prepared. She didn't move.

His face looked somewhere between human, and a red and black skull, oddly masculine, with extremely defined eyebrows and jaw, and a couple fangs that went over his bottom lip. He had two enormous black horns that curled up. His long black hair wasn't hair at all, but tendrils, each an inch thick and long enough to pass his shoulders. And his red and black eyes looked into her with the anticipation she would have shown a pizza.

He lowered his sword.

"Loria!" he said, voice mostly human, with a touch of gravel. Did he smoke? "Loria!" He turned to the side and looked to the woman beside him.

A woman, nearly seven feet tall, and a gargoyle. She wore the same sort of armor, and she leaned forward with the same sort of half human, half animal posture because of her tail. When the demon called her name, she stood up straighter, thinner tail resting on the ground as she turned to look at Mia and the other demon. She had a more normal human face, though a couple fangs poked over her bottom lip, too. She had the same sort of raptorial feet, but she had wings, big black ones with red undersides and a claw thumb.

She was covered in blood, one of her clawed hands inside a human man's chest. With a hearty grunt of exertion, she ripped her hand free of the dead man, tossed the body aside, and lifted the dripping lump to her lips. She came closer as she bit into the heart, and chewed.

They were going to do that to her. They were going to tear out her heart and eat it. They were going to do that to her, and David. Oh god, David? She looked around again, and froze again. More people were getting butchered, but not all of them. Thousands of humans had fallen into the river, and it looked like a hundred demons of all shapes and sizes had been waiting for them, not enough to catch everyone. More than a few humans were carted away, screaming and kicking as the demons dragged them off. Meals for later, maybe. Lots of humans got away, bare feet slapping against the shore of stone and... and bones. The shore was covered in human bones.

None of the humans came and helped Mia.

“Yeah Brennus?”

“Come here, look at this fresh meat. No mark.”

“No mark?” The gargoyle woman ripped another chunk of meat out of her heart, and frowned down at Mia as she leaned in and chewed. “You sure?”

Brennus reached out with his free hand, and brushed Mia’s hair aside off her soaked forehead. She didn’t move.

“See? No mark.”

“No mark.” Loria nodded as she leaned in closer, face only inches from Mia. “She’s froze up. Easy meal.”

“Yeah, I could eat her. But have you ever seen an unmarked before?”

“No.” Loria laughed, shaking her head. One of her big black horns brushed against Mia’s forehead. She didn’t move. “I suppose you’re thinking Diogo will want to see her.”

“Couldn’t hurt, right?”

She laughed more. It was a sinister laugh.

“You’re really scared Diogo’s gonna eat you, aren’t you?”

“He’s not happy with me.”

“So he’s going to eat you?”

Brennus nodded as he swung his sword behind him, and hooked its handle onto something on his back.

“He ate Dareemus.”

“Well, Dareemus fucked his favorite betrayer. So... You didn’t.”

Brennus winced as he looked at Loria, simultaneously reaching out and slipping his huge, clawed hand behind Mia’s head. He was warm, warmer than a human.

“I didn’t.”

“You didn’t?”

“I didn’t fuck Sarah.” Chuckling, he winked at Loria, and licked his lips and fangs with a massive pink tongue. “I fucked Marilyn.”

“Diogo found out? And you’re still alive? Lucky.”

Nodding, Brennus yanked on Mia’s head, and threw her to the ground, away from the red river. Her knees and palms scrapped against the stones and bones. Brennus grabbed her shoulder, rolled her over, and used his other hand to pull one of his chains from his belt. It clinked against the others, making the half dozen human skulls bounce around the demon’s legs as he wrapped the chain tight around Mia’s wrists.

“Alright, unmarked, you get to live your first day in Hell. You’re coming with me.” He scooped her up like she weighed nothing, and threw her over his shoulder so her stomach rested flat against the sheet of metal bent around it. It hurt.

She didn’t make a sound. She didn’t move. All she could do was stare out toward the river, the shore covered in thousands and thousands of bones, and the humans being slaughtered like cattle. Some of the demons laughed, clearly enjoying themselves. Some didn’t, frowning as they jumped humans and killed them. All of them made an effort to get a kill, and get a heart to eat.

She wanted to cry, but her body refused. Shock? She didn’t know what shock felt like. It was a miracle she was capable of thinking at all. Every part of her wanted to close her eyes and pretend none of this was happening. Pretend she was back up at the gates of Heaven, surrounded by friendly angels, welcoming her into paradise.

She forced herself to stare out at the river and watch more humans get eaten. A dozen humans ran down the river, with a giant brute of a demon following them. He didn’t have horns like the others, but his face was even more skull like, and he must have been nine feet tall, bigger and bulkier than the demon carrying Mia. He roared as he closed in on the group of humans, and came to a stop when one of the humans landed at his feet.

One of the other humans, a woman, had grabbed the nearest man, yanked on his shoulder, and had thrown him down. It was how you outran a bear, right? You didn’t need to be faster than the bear, just faster than the person you were with.

It made Mia want to puke. How could someone do something like that?

Because they were in Hell.

She watched and scanned the river as it grew further and further away. Where was David? He’d grabbed her and put himself between her and the water when they landed, and he’d hit hard. Maybe he couldn’t get up from the water? Maybe he’d drowned? Maybe he was already dead? Maybe one of the demons had jumped him and tore his heart out and eaten it.

Tears blurred her eyes. Now she could cry. But before everything disappeared in a blurry mess, she looked at some of the humans nearby, their corpses on the ground around her.

They had numbers on their foreheads, in their foreheads, as if someone had carved them into their flesh with a knife. The demons hadn't done it. One of the people crawling out of the river, a demon behind them kicking them and forcing them out onto the shore, had the number 189 carved in their forehead. She saw one corpse with the number 284. Another with 402. Another with 134... no, 133? Did it change?

She tried to make out more numbers, but they disappeared under tears. She went limp, ignored the pain of her body crushing into the demon's shoulder, and cried.

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~~David~~

Hands grabbed him and threw him onto shore. The only reason he knew it was a shore, was because he was vaguely aware he'd just been drowning. Attempts to open his eyes blurred everything red as he stared up, and it took a second to realize it was for two reasons: the water he'd been drowning in was red, and the red sky was on fire.

The sky was fire.

He groaned and tried to sit up. Mistake. Pain shot up through his left arm, and his groan morphed into a yelp as he laid back down. A quick glance at the shoulder showed the normally round shape of it was kinda drawn out and down, and thinner. Oh, his arm wasn't in the socket.

Someone overhead blocked his vision of the fire sky, and smiled.

Demon? Big sharp white teeth, big fangs, black and red eyes, big black horns. Demon.

Oh, right. He'd fallen from Heaven, through some sort of portal, down through a hole filled with screaming dead people, through a gate that he almost recognized from Stargate. He was in Hell. They'd been falling toward a red river, and—they.

He sat up, pushing himself up with his good arm, and looked around.

“Mia? Mia!? Mia where—”

The demon standing over him slammed him back into the ground, hard enough to knock the wind out of him, and his skull bounced against the stones. Except, whatever his head hit, shattered, softening the impact to only headache-inducing instead of concussion-causing. Soft rocks? He turned his head enough to see the shards of white.

Bone. Bone had shattered under him. And the shore was covered in them. Hundreds. Thousands? Tens of thousands of bones, and many of them were getting crushed under the feet of demons, and nearby fleeing humans. None of them so much as looked his way, let alone came to help him. Many of them were being torn open, screaming death shrieks as their blood poured into the red river, dyeing it.

“No mark,” the demon said. Male voice, gravely, scary, slightly higher pitched than David expected.

“Mark?” David asked.

“No mark.” The demon poked him in the forehead with a big claw, almost hard enough to draw blood.

“No mark,” another demon said. David turned his head enough to see another come close, similar to the other one but not quite the same. He could see distant demons with male and female shapes, some with tails, some with wings, all of them varying degrees of big and tall, to very big and very tall. But the demons near him didn't seem any taller than four feet. And there were half a dozen of them.

They had black eyes with red irises, mostly human faces with too-big scary smiles, black horns sticking up from their foreheads, and red and black skin. Three of them walked around on hooves, the other three walked on raptorial feet, black claws digging into the rocks and bones. They wore armor, bits of metal held on by leather straps, and skulls dangled off them from metal chains. The fact they were all four feet tall, instead of huge like the others, didn't make them any less scary. He was going to die to a swarm of piranha, instead of one hungry shark.

He lay on a shore of bones, in Hell. He was surrounded by demons, and now that he was above the surface of the red water with a second to listen, he couldn't not hear the screams of all the people being butchered, people just like him. The demons were killing them, tearing their chests open and ripping out their hearts. They were eating the people's hearts. They'd probably done that to Mia. They were going to do that to him.

He was intellectualizing and rationalizing again, describing reality like it wasn't happening to him. That was fine. He was going to die anyway, or suffer eternal torture or whatever, might as well keep that reality at a distance instead of having it scar him.

“Eat?” one of the demons asked the other.

“Take to Diogo?” another asked.

The closest one shook her head, before grinning down at David.

“I eat. Unmarked might be strong. Special! Tasty.”

Another demon shoved her. “No! Mine!”

Another one of them came closer, and started clicking. Not tongue clucking, but clicking, in the throat, like a dolphin, fast trilling sounds.

The first demon shook her head. “I said mine! I said—”

David stabbed her in the eye with a bone. He had one good arm, and for some reason, his hand had dug through the stones and bones until it found one with a pointy tip. So, while still on his back, still completely fucked, still doomed, he swung out with his good arm and managed to sink what looked like a broken femur into one of the demon’s eyes. Did it seem like a good idea at the time? Nope. But, he did it anyway.

The demon shrieked. The other demons laughed, pointed at her, and laughed some more. David lay there and didn’t do shit. They had him surrounded, so random stabbing wasn’t going to work anymore. Best he managed was an extra ten seconds before they ate him like a pack of hyenas.

“Eat! Eat!” One of the male ones with hooves hopped over, and flapped his wings enough to increase his jump so he landed on David’s gut hard. “Unmarked is strong. Will taste—”

The demon flew to the side as something red and black smashed into it. They rolled down the shore into the river, shrieking and clicking, one wing broken, and the arm looked broken, too.

Well, that was strange.

David lifted his head up, and looked around at the five remaining small demons, as they all dove at the two demons rushing toward them. One of them had a tail. Oh, that’s what had hit the demon off him. A long tail sticking out of the back of a gargoyle that must have been nearly seven feet tall.

A feminine gargoyle, with a human face, sorta? She had a couple big fangs, and a couple giant black horns sticking out of the top of her skull. Black hair. No, not hair, more like black rope hanging from her skull. Tendrils? Whoever, whatever she was, she was much bigger than the other demons, and she half roared, half banshee shrieked, as she pounced on one of them, and ripped them apart.

David rolled over. Oh, there it was. Pain. Yeap, that was pain. Falling through the tunnel to Hell, through a sky of fire, crashing into a river hard enough to dislocate his arm, and getting his stomach kicked in, that hadn't registered. Rolling over with a dislocated arm? Yeap, that fucking sucked, and he screamed as it flopped onto the stones and bones. It didn't matter. He had to see, had to know what was happening.

Four of the little demons dove at the much larger demon. She had armor too, more bent black metal that looked like it'd been hammered on and strapped on with leather and chains. The smaller demons had human skulls dangling from various parts of them, some strapped on too, but this gargoyle didn't. Every skull attached to her body had horns.

One of the demons went for her back, but the big gargoyle woman spun around, and her long tail slammed into them, too. The tail had spikes sticking out of the back of it toward the base near her spine, but most of it was bare and smooth, except for a couple metal chunks that were strapped to it. She hit the smaller demon with one of those metal slabs, in the face, and teeth and fangs flew out of their mouth. But the other three demons surrounded her and—

Got run over by the other demon. The new demon was only half a foot shorter than the tall gargoyle, ran on hooves, and had no tail or wings. A satyr? A satyr with four curling, huge black ram horns. A satyr with no eyes. Two of her big, curling horns came out of some sort of black bone mask plate thing over where her eyes should have been. Like her gargoyle friend, the satyr wore armor, more black metal, leather, and skulls. And like her gargoyle friend, she didn't hesitate to run into the smaller demons, literally. She smashed into them head first, hard enough to knock one down and break bones, before she got her claws into them and tore them apart.

The smaller demons were clearly outmatched, but they didn't care. They didn't fly away, or run away, or hop away. They let out demonic roars and angry shrieks, and threw themselves at the two other demons. No sense of self preservation?

David snapped his eyes around, looking to other demons, but most of them were upstream, not close enough to interfere. Not close enough to give a shit either, considering not a one of them so much as looked their way, all far more interested in catching themselves a human or two before they got away. A few demons did look down the river toward them, but shrugged and went back to their own hunts.

The gargoyle got her claws into one of the small demons, and ripped their wings off. The roars turned into screams, and ended just as fast as she ripped the demon's throat out. Another one got their chest kicked in by the satyr, metal breastplate dented deep enough to break the bones underneath. They went down clutching at their chest, gasping for breath, only for the next kick to break in their skull. It

left the satyr's back open, and one of the demon's jumped her, only to land on the many spikes that covered the satyr's back and shoulders. Not enough to get injured, but enough to give the small demon a hard time.

Enough time for the gargoyle to dash around, rip the demon from her friend's back, and rip their throat out. Always the throat, the reddest place on the smaller demon's bodies. The reddest place on her body, and the satyr's body, too.

The little demon with the broken arm rushed out of the river, past David, but someone grabbed their tail and made them fall. Oh, wait, that was his hand, doing its own thing again. The demon turned around and shrieked at him, but turning his back to the other two got him pinned to the ground and his throat ripped open a second later by the satyr.

Which left David, on his stomach, staring at the satyr and gargoyle, with six demon corpses around.

"Heh, you got guts, fresh meat." Chuckling, the gargoyle squatted down beside him, turned the small demon over, ripped off their armor, and tore open their chest as casually as a lifetime hunter would skin a rabbit. So efficient and fast David almost didn't notice the gore, until it flowed being the stones. "Daoka, you good?"

The satyr came over, clicking in her throat like the small demons had a few times. She had a sharp chin and cheeks, with small lips. Unlike the gargoyle, she was bald, and the four huge ram horns looked almost like a hat, or a crown over the dark red, almost black skin. For a second, he thought maybe she didn't have fangs, but when she opened her smaller mouth to bite into the heart the gargoyle ripped out of the small demon and handed her, he could definitely see them.

"Cannibalism?" he asked.

The gargoyle looked at him, blinked a few times, burst into laughter, and grabbed another demon corpse. With strength he'd only expect to see on a male powerlifter, she ripped the demon's armor off its chest, drove her claws into the chest, tore out its heart, and ate it. She took several bites, each big and messy, and blood flowed down her dark red skin and down over her armor as she walked back over to him while the satyr tore out some more hearts.

"Fresh meat always asks stupid questions, once they get the nerve to. Usually takes more than five minutes in Hell, though." Shrugging, the gargoyle squatted down in front of him again and hooked her huge wings snug to her back, with the thumb claws hooking around her neck. Like a cape. "So, what'd you do?"

“I... what?”

Laughing more, big and full, she grabbed him and rolled him back onto his back, earning a pained yowl out of him. It only got worse when she grabbed his dislocated arm, and yanked on it, pulling it away from his torso perpendicular. His scream made her chuckle, and his groan of satisfaction and relief as his arm slipped back into its socket made her laugh even louder.

“You’re in Hell, right? What’d you do? If it’s interesting I might let you live.”

The satyr clicked her throat a few times, looking their way before ripping out another demon heart.

“What?” the gargoyle said, looking to her friend. “Six imp and grem hearts isn’t gonna keep us fed long, Dao. We killed them ‘cause they’re Diogo’s, not because you’re hungry. We could always use more food.”

The satyr clicked some more.

“Yes, I know. So we can kill this dude right here, fat ass.”

David blinked up at the gargoyle standing over him, ignored the blood that dripped off her armor onto his chest, and looked to the satyr collecting hearts. Four hearts, almost as big as human hearts; he knew how big his own was now, for comparison. She held them like someone collecting apples with no basket. Apparently the satyr had an appetite.

“I didn’t do anything,” he said.

The gargoyle laughed, something she did a lot, and squatted down over him, straddling him face to face. Her tail slithered left and right slowly like a swimming crocodile, gliding over his legs. Warm, warmer than a human.

“You’re in Hell, dude. What’d you do to—” Her black and red eyes snapped open wide, and she squatted down closer. Closer. Too close, until her face was only a few inches above his. “Where’s your mark?”

“Mark?”

“Mark, dumbass.” She pressed her hand to his forehead and brushed his hair aside, coating his head in blood. He didn’t move. “You... don’t have a mark.”

He couldn’t move his head to see, but some clicking sounds confirmed the satyr had come closer. Four giant black horns coming in close from overhead confirmed. The satyr was looking down at him, with no eyes.

“I don’t know what you mean. Mark?”

“Mark! Mark, you dumbass. I—oh, here.” The gargoyle got up, and walked down the shore into the water. David didn’t move, not with the satyr still looking down at him. Why did she talk with clicks, and not words? Why didn’t she have eyes? The big solid plate of black across where eyes should have been actually looked kinda like bone from so close, the same sort of dark material her huge horns were made of.

She clicked a few times.

“David,” he said, because obviously the only thing the satyr could be asking was what was his name. What else?

“Here,” the gargoyle said, coming back over him with a decapitated head in her hands, a fresh head, a woman who’d had long black hair, maybe from the Middle East. Hard to tell with all the blood. She hadn’t killed anyone to get it, it’d just floated down the river. “Look, dumbass. Mark.” She pointed to the number on the dead woman’s forehead, something carved into it like someone had taken a knife or claw to the skin.

“452?” he asked.

The gargoyle laughed, threw the corpse head over her shoulder into the river, and squatted down over top him again.

“She must have been an evil bitch to get a number that high. But that don’t mean shit down here, just that she’s tastier.” Shrugging, the gargoyle ran the blunt side of her claw along his forehead. “Seriously, where’s your mark? No one gets through the first gate without one.”

“First gate?”

“Uh, you know, the giant bridge of flesh and bone and stone? Enormous skulls with fire in their eyes? Big famous Estian letters spelling out ‘Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here’ on the gate? You went through it to fall through the portal to Hell?”

He blinked. A lot.

“I... didn’t go through that gate.”

“You didn’t? Holy shit. That... That’s...” The gargoyle stood up and gestured to her satyr friend, who was still crouching over David’s head and looking down over him. “Any ideas?”

The satyr clicked in her throat, slow and deep — for dolphin clicks — before she shrugged.

“I dunno, Dao. Diogo’s pretty furious. Stick our heads on pikes furious.”

More clicks, more desperate this time.

“Don’t fucking talk to me about Leos! I want to kill Diogo and Tacitus as much as you, but—”

Louder clicks. The satyr Daoka stood over David and shoved her friend hard enough to make her stumble back.

“Fine, fine! Jesus Christ, I get it.” Groaning, she gestured down at David, and the satyr reached down and scooped him up. “It’s your lucky day, fresh meat.”

“I—”

Daoka set him down on his feet, and made no effort to make sure he landed softly. The jolt of his weight shoving up through his heels into his skull was painful, and he groaned, only for the gargoyle to slap him in the ass and send another spark of pain through him.

“Alright, we’re going back to my hideout. Move it, fresh meat.”

“I’m David.”

“Ha! I love it when you guys treat your first day in Hell like it’s no big.” Shrugging, the gargoyle woman gave him a shove, and pointed toward the distant, jagged mountains. “It’ll hit you later.”

“Probably.”

Apparently the gargoyle woman thought he was hilarious, because she burst into laughter even louder, loud enough to draw the attention of the demons up the shore. But they didn’t come. Were they afraid of these two? Probably not. The gargoyle was almost seven feet tall, towering over him, and while the armor covered a fair bit of her, he could see plenty of muscle on the feminine figure, and same for the satyr, too. But some of the demons in the distance were bigger. A lot bigger.

They just didn’t care. Six dead small demons, imps and grems according to the gargoyle, and the other demons didn’t give a shit. But then, he was literally walking on a shoreline of white, because it was covered in bones, and the water was red probably because people kept getting ripped apart in it.

That was the world he was in now. Demons slaughtering humans, and each other. And no one cared.

“I’m Jeskura,” the gargoyle said, “not that it matters.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Nah.” She pushed him forward with one of her giant bat wings before hooking it to her back and neck again. “You’re fresh meat. Just a free meal for any demons lucky enough to see the portal open.”

“The portal opens around randomly?”

“Yeap.” She shoved him again, and pointed to the mountains. “Come on. You get to live for now, but don’t push it. You got a few hours hiking to do, and I wanna get out of here before people recognize us.”

“I—”

“I said move!” She used her tail to hit him in his ass this time, and he yelped.

He got walking. Bones crunched under his feet, and the stones pressed and dug into his skin. He looked down and stared at the white and bloody shoreline as it changed into stone, before he looked up and stared into the burning sky. Adrenaline crash, assuming his body even did the adrenaline thing anymore. He could feel things again, more than just the big pain, but the little pains too. He could feel the rocks stabbing his soft feet. He could feel the dull ache in his shoulder. He could feel the hot air blowing by. He could hear the two demons escorting him breathe. He could...

He could think about Mia again.

“My sister,” he said. “She... She was with me.”

Dao looked over her spiky shoulder to him and Jeskura, and she clicked softly before shaking her head and letting it hang.

“Dao says your sister is probably dead. But if she didn’t have a mark either, a demon might be thinking the same thing we are. Take you to Diogo and get on his good side.”

“Diogo?”

“Bailiff for this corner of Hell and Death’s Grip.”

“Bailiff?”

Laughing all the more, the gargoyle slipped an arm over his shoulders, and walked with him, like they were buddies. Good. If she didn’t distract him, he’d break down crying. She’d been right, the hellish reality did hit him later, just not later enough.

He pushed it aside. Focus on learning about Hell, and on finding a way to save your sister.

“You got a lot of questions, fresh meat. Don’t suppose you can just accept that you’re in Hell, and you’re probably gonna die? Horribly? And then again and again and again. Questions are pointless. Hilarious, but pointless.”

“Die again?”

“Yeap. The mark I showed you on that corpse? That was just their first death. They gotta die that many times before they get to go to the Great Tower, and Hell will make sure each death is fucking torture.”

He trembled.

“But,” she said, “you don’t have a mark. Never seen that before. So hey, maybe you’ll only have to die the first time? If that’s true, consider yourself lucky you don’t have to become a remnant.”

“Rem—”

“You’ll see, later.”

“Oh.” He gulped as he nodded, before looking up at the gargoyle woman with her arm still around his shoulders. “So, you’re going to... take me to this Diogo, so you can get on his good side?”

“Yes and no. We’re gonna take you to Diogo so we can trick him into lowering his guard. Then we’re gonna rip the fucker’s head off.”

“Oh. And... you’re telling me this because—”

“Because who the fuck you gonna tell, fresh meat? Besides, I like you. You stabbed gremla demon, and tripped up that impin.” She leaned in and poked him in the cheek with her other hand as she grinned at him, black and red eyes up close. “And you make me laugh.”

“I’m... just asking questions.”

“Yeap, that’s why you’re so funny. By now most fresh meat is a blubbering mess, on their knees screaming up at God for mercy and shit. No one answers.” She shrugged and let him go, and walked slightly behind him as they made their way toward a path between the massive mountains. “You got me in a good mood, now. So keep ‘em coming, I guess.”

Keep them coming? Oh, questions. His confusion was her entertainment. Better than his pain, he supposed.

“I’m the only unmarked you’ve seen?”

“That anyone’s ever seen, far as I know. People don’t get into Hell unmarked, fresh meat.”

He gulped, forced down the rising urge to cry again, and looked for something to talk about. Keep talking, keep learning. Get answers. He needed answers.

“It... It was weird. I was at the gates of Heaven, I guess, when my sister and I tried to walk through them, and—”

Daoka turned around, and leaned in toward him, tilting her head to the side as she clicked a few times quietly. He didn't need to understand her clicks to guess she was curious.

Of course, when Jeskura spun him around to face her directly, and her eyes were dead serious, it was obvious they both wanted to know more.

“You saw Heaven?”

“I uh... the gate to it, yeah. Touched it even, kinda.”

“Holy fucking shit.” She tightened her grip on his shoulders and shook him, earning a pained groan as she squeezed on his bad shoulder. It stayed in the socket, somehow. “Details!”

“Details?”

“Details, fresh meat. Give us details! No one's ever seen the pearly white gates.” Nodding, a smile across her dark red skin and red lips, she walked with him. “You tell us about what you saw, and we'll make sure you don't die the most painful death possible.”

But he'd still die.

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The walk was painful. His bare feet hated the ground, the stones, the dirt. It wasn't long before he had to stare at the ground with each step to avoid sharp things, which annoyed the two demons escorting him. But they cut him some slack as he described what the gates of Heaven had been like. The angels, the warm aura, the gold, the infinite universe above, the floating islands, all of it.

He planned to ask more questions of his own, but every second his eyes found something to be distracted by instead. The path led between two colossal mountains and became a ravine, and the thousands of bones that'd littered the shore of the distant river, and much of the ground, were gone. Instead, the sharp rocks were bleeding. No, not bleeding, blood didn't glow amber. Amber veins? Amber didn't glow, either, but these did.

Every so often, in the barren wasteland of nothing but rock and stone, they found a bush. Withered, defiant against its surroundings, and on fire. Burning bushes. Another thing to ask about. And of course the burning sky, clouds of literal fire, that lit up the dark mountains. No sun, no moon, just fire.

A shape around a large rock froze him still, and Jeskura chuckled before giving him a shove. It wasn't a demon, just a statue of one. A big one, something male, not wearing armor. It didn't have any spikes on its body unlike the two women with him. No horns or tail or wings either, or genitalia for that matter; might not have even been male, really. Nine feet tall, extremely muscular, skull-like demon face, big claws. He was standing tall and proud, arms up and out, and each of them had a skull in hand, human skulls. Real skulls. Did someone put them there, in the statue's hands?

The deeper the two demons took him into the mountains, and eventually up them along another harsh, winding path, the more things he found. Every so often they found vines along the ground or walls of rock, covered in red thorns that might as well have been spikes, and his curiosity quickly earned him a bleeding finger.

He had so many questions, and he wanted to ask them, but he couldn't stop staring at things. The breaking point was when they came across a metal pillar in the ground, made of a dark stone bordering on pure metal, like the statue, and it was topped with a burning bush. And the burning bush was burning inside a giant black metal demon skull, on top of the ten-foot pillar.

"The bush, is on fire," he said, gesturing to the pillar, "and it doesn't burn away. And it's a bush, growing out of metal, and—"

Daoka let out a clicking chuckle, and flicked him in the shoulder before she jumped ahead, scaling the upward path way too easily.

"Hell grew it," Jeskura said.

"Grew it?"

"She did."

"She?" Right, the angel had described Heaven and Hell with 'she'. Maybe there was something to that?

With another hearty laugh, the demon slipped her arm around his shoulders again, and walked beside him. She didn't mind physical contact in the slightest, which seemed kind of weird to him, considering he was basically just a meal to her, or a tool to be sacrificed to this Diogo demon.

“Hell grows a lot of things. You can tell a lot by what she’s growing.”

“Oh.” Hell was alive?

“So, tell me pipsqueak, you really aren’t some vile shitlord asshole?”

“What?”

The satyr ahead of them clicked enthusiastically.

“Dao, he wouldn’t be here if he wasn’t a sack of shit. That’s kind of the point of Hell.”

She clicked some more.

Jeskura rolled her eyes, but shrugged and looked back down at David.

“I don’t believe you’re innocent, but Dao does. You really weren’t a shitty person? A scumbag?”

“I... don’t think so? I mean, I did spy on some naked people for a while there, when I was a ghost, but—”

Jeskura burst into laughter, and Dao’s dolphin clicks rapid fired as she sat down. It was a strangely soothing sound, a dolphin laugh.

“That is fucking adorable,” the gargoyle said. “That the worst thing you did?”

“I... think so? That isn’t enough?”

“Fuck no. Being a pervert and spying on people isn’t enough to get you sent to Hell. I mean, unless you were dripping with hate and loathing when you did it?”

“I don’t think I was.”

“Then this is fucking weird, because I’ve killed hundreds of souls, fresh meat. Me, and every other demon who’s been around for a while, and every so often we ask questions to learn about who we’re killing. Curiosity, right? And every time it’s the same shit.” She poked him in his chest with her other hand, almost hard enough to draw blood. “Every human who comes down here is a giant shit stain. A pile of maggots. The fucking worst. Hateful fucking rats, you know? They either did the worst shit, or they planned on it, and you can’t even talk to them without feeling the resentment and hate they had for people on the surface.

“You though, I don’t get that at all. You’re just a... fucking pussy nerd. No wonder you’re not marked.”

He frowned up at the gargoyle, which of course made her laugh more.

“I’m...” His frown broke, and he slowly looked down. “Maybe it was a mistake? Maybe... someone will come rescue me? Maybe Mia, too?”

“Ha, maybe? The fuck do I know? All I know is, you’re unmarked, which means Zel will want you, which means Diogo will want to give you to her. Which will be our way in.” Nodding, she gave him a gentle push forward. “Not my problem.”

The satyr clicked, and it sounded harsher and louder than her other clicks.

“No angel is going to trade with us, Dao,” Jeskura said. “Besides, the fuck would they trade with?”

Daoka sighed but nodded, and hopped ahead some more.

“Demons talk to angels?” he asked.

“Not usually, but angels have been seen a lot lately. They started showing up more a few years ago, and now every demon in this whole corner of Hell has seen at least one angel at some point, flying overhead.” She tapped one of her horns as she looked up. “Angels start showing up, then the first unmarked I’ve ever heard of shows up? Coincidence?”

Daoka chirped.

“Exactly.”

“How can you understand her?” he asked.

“Demons can understand Hellian.”

“Hellian? I... what?”

“Ha. Most humans just call it Clicker. Not Estian, like we’re speaking.”

“We’re... speaking English?”

She rolled her eyes, and gave him a gentle shove again. “We’re speaking Estian, fresh meat. You—” He fell, right onto his knees and palms, and bit down the urge to groan. She raised a brow as she looked down at his feet, before sighing and shaking her head. “Fresh meat is always so soft. Damn it, I hadn’t planned on this.”

He gulped down the urge to yell as he rolled over and looked down at his feet. They were bleeding, pretty badly, and not because he’d stepped on anything sharp. Hiking for a few hours on bare feet, when he’d been wearing socks and sneakers since he could remember, meant baby soft feet getting torn up by the ground. He almost hadn’t noticed.

“Sorry...”

Jeskura stared at him like he'd just exploded randomly.

“Seriously? Sorry? Fuck, what the...” Jeskura sighed and shrugged, but before she could say more, someone scooped David up.

Daoka. He froze as he stared up at her, and she smiled down at him; a strangely nice, gentle smile, even without eyes. The small mouth and sharp jawline gave her an almost sinister look, let alone the four huge black horns and bone-plate-visor thing where eyes should have been. But the smile was anything but sinister. It was kind.

“Dao! Don't get attached.”

Daoka chirped at Jeskura, loudly at that, and hugged David to her armored chest tightly as she hopped up along the path.

“Dao, get back here! He's not a pet! We're taking him to Diogo, remember? It was your idea!”

Dao clicked louder, but didn't stop. David held on, thankful for any opportunity to get off his feet. Now that he was off them and someone was carrying him, the pain he'd been ignoring flooded him again, and he clenched his teeth and forced down the groans. Everything ached. His feet burned. His skin burned, and the blemishes he was covered in apparently weren't all dirt, but some burn marks too. His shoulder felt awful.

But he was being carried by a badass pretty satyr, so he had that going for him.

The gargoyle flapped her bat wings and caught up to them with a big leap as they continued up a winding path, up the mountainside.

“Yes, I know he's unmarked. Yes I know he's—”

More clicks, faster this time, and Dao turned to unleash the barrage of deep dolphin sounds at the gargoyle beside her.

“Hey, I believe you! He shouldn't be here, but he is. What, you don't want Diogo and Tacitus dead anymore?”

Dao sighed, but stopped hopping, slowing to a lazy walk, but still holding David to her chest, one arm under his back, the other under his legs. She shook her head and leaned in toward Jeskura, clicking softly and slowly.



Jeskura sighed and leaned in as well, and the two of them bumped foreheads before sharing a quick kiss over David's head. Oh, interesting. Demons in love? It was enough to make him forget his feet were bleeding, for a few seconds.

"I say we still take him to see Diogo, but fine, we'll try and keep him alive. We have to do something before he kills us, or before Tacitus catches you. Unless you want that fucker on your ass again?"

Dao nodded, but clicked a few times, higher pitched, and bouncy.

Jes laughed and nodded, and flicked David in the head.

"She likes you. You're the only human she's ever met who isn't an asshole."

"I... thanks. But, uh, you haven't met other humans who've just pretended to be nice?"

"Oh yeah, plenty. They always have the biggest number."

"Biggest—oh, the number. So that's really a number that tells you how... evil someone is?"

She nodded as her and Daoka resumed walking.

"I'm just a gorgala trying to get by, fresh meat. Not like I know shit about anything. You want answers for the big questions, ask Zel. But yeah, from personal experience, the bigger the number, the bigger the asshole. And tastier."

Doaka clicked and trilled, and hugged David to her chest armor tighter. Thankfully his groan of pain was enough to get her to lighten the grip.

"And Dao seems to like you, like you're some puppy."

"Th—you know what puppies are?"

"Ha, yeah. I'll show you later." Nodding, she slipped into a big crack in the side of the mountain, wings snug to her back. Dao followed.

The crack in the stone twisted and turned, like a vein, and it got very close and tight in a few places. Dao made it work. She didn't want him walking, and if she was gonna treat him like a pet, he wasn't going to say no.

And if they were still gonna take him to see Diogo, that was good, too, if that's where Mia was. Assuming she was alive.

He shut his eyes tight. She was alive. She had to be alive.

The darkness of the claustrophobic tunnel disappeared, erased by amber light, and he forced his eyes open. There were literal amber veins on the walls, bathing them in its strange glow. Amber wasn't supposed to glow, but this stuff did, and the light wasn't static. It pulsed, ever so slightly, like some sort of... slow heartbeat.

Jes walked ahead of them, and came to a stop as the thin tunnel hit a dead end. The amber light showed her grabbing some sort of giant, thick bone, something that must have belonged to a creature's leg, something at least thirty feet tall when it was alive. Whatever it'd come from, it was strong enough she used it as a lever, and pushed a boulder as tall as them aside.

It was a cave, hidden behind a boulder. Once they were inside, Dao set him down on the ground, and the two demons worked together to push the boulder back into place. Not an easy feat.

David didn't move, but he did look up and around at the big cave, its roof fifteen feet overhead, its walls well lit with amber veins. It had plenty of alcoves, too, some long enough he couldn't see how deep they went. All in all, it seemed like a cozy cave, compared to caves he'd seen pictures of. There was even a bed.

He raised a brow, still on his ass, as he looked at the bed. Someone had taken some stones and bones, and made something like a bed frame. The blankets were piled in layers, some brown, some dark red, and squinting for some detail revealed they were actually leather. He almost said something stupid, like 'that can't be comfortable', and then reality slapped his brain. His feet were bleeding from walking on stones, and every single inch of Hell he'd seen so far looked beyond uncomfortable. Those leather blankets were probably the most comfortable place in the entire... dimension.

Only now that he had a second to really pay attention did he even notice all the bones around, skulls in particular, a lot of them sitting on alcove edges. Most of them weren't human, and some of those skulls were very large. Plenty of them hung from chains, black metal somehow bolted into the stone ceiling, except not bolted. Just, merged, as if it'd grown out of the stone.

"Alright, you stay there." Jeskura scooped him up by his wrists, lifted him, and dropped him down by a wall not too far from the bed, the uneven floor putting him at about the same height as the bed. Before he knew what was happening, she grabbed some rope, black, almost like cord, and tied his hands over his head to some bones that came out of the wall, their ends trapped in the stone, like bars. That was strangely convenient, and made absolutely no sense. Nothing about this place made sense.

"I... don't think I can move that boulder." He nodded to the giant rock blocking the exit. "I can't escape." Hopefully there were some cracks in the walls somewhere for air, because for some reason, his ghost body still needed to breathe.

“Yeah but that doesn’t mean you can’t stab me in the face while I sleep.” Shrugging, the gargoyle stood up and backed away, smiling at him. “Damn it’s a good thing we found you when we did, fresh meat. Lot of demons out there want to get on Diogo and Zel’s good side, and they wouldn’t give two shits about throwing you to him for a free upgrade on the respect ladder.”

The gargoyle talked far too much like a human would. It was unsettling.

He looked up at where his wrist was bound to one bone, a foot to the side and above his head, and the same for the other. Not tight enough to cut off circulation, if that was a thing in Hell, but tight enough he wasn’t going anywhere. He might even be able to fall asleep.

“Thanks,” he said. “For... for helping me.”

“Oh god damn, you are so fucking nice it is fucking killing me. I can even see it in your eyes, too. You’re not trying to trick me.” She squatted down in front of him, chuckling as she poked him in his naked chest again. “You really are like a puppy.”

“I still don’t—”

“I’ll show you the scrying pool tomorrow. For now, sleep.”

Daoka clicked a few times, a softer sound, and she nodded as she reached down and ran her fingers and claws through his short red hair. A tender touch. She really did think he was a puppy.

He wanted to say something, maybe ask about the future, how exactly they expected to kill Diogo while using him as a bait, and what they planned to do after that. Not knowing the future was like acid in his veins, but he was just too damn tired to ask any more questions. And much as they were being strangely nice to him, compared to the slaughter he witnessed on the river shore, he didn’t want to push his luck.

The problem was, now that he had nothing to do but sit in a cave, hands bound behind him, ass on the floor and back against the cave wall, there was nothing to occupy his mind. There was nothing to stop him from thinking about what’d happened to him. The gates of Heaven, an eternity of endless joy — and sex apparently — just a few feet away, before him and Mia were denied. Then, pain. And slaughter. Screaming, blood, death.

He sniffed and looked to the side. Crying sucked, especially in front of other people, but a few tears managed to sneak out anyway.

Daoka squatted down in front of him and ran her claws through his hair again, clicking gently, only for Jeskura to come up behind her and help her stand back up.

“You can play with your puppy later. You know the drill, he’s processing shit. Let him deal. Besides, wound check time.” Nodding, Jeskura undid some of the straps holding the metal plates against Daoka’s arms, and tossed them to the side. They landed on the stone floor, hard enough to bounce and scratch the dark metal, but the two demons didn’t care. They were a little gentler with the skulls, setting their belts down against another wall, so the skulls clinked together lightly as they settled.

David gulped as the gargoyle removed the satyr’s armor in its entirety. She wasn’t wearing anything underneath it.

Red and black skin, and if he had to guess, everywhere her body was soft her skin was red, and the harder parts were black, given that her back and outer thighs and shins were all black, but her stomach and throat were red. He outright froze when Jeskura winked at him, and tossed Dao’s breastplate aside. He blinked up at the two demons, and did his best to not stare, but... he stared, eyes locked onto the tall satyr’s huge breasts that defied gravity with their firmness. Her curvy, thin-but-muscular legs, her black hooves, her very large, defined ass, the various black spikes she had on her joints and back, he couldn’t really focus on any of it. The satyr was gorgeous.

“Nope, you’re good.” Nodding, Jeskura held out her arms, and Daoka turned, pointing her huge butt straight at David as she undid the gargoyle’s armor. Same thing, red and black skin, a gradient of shades between the softer and harder areas.

He hadn’t expected the demons to look so amazing naked. Jeskura had a very tight stomach, tiny and flat, with abs that connected to amazing legs; not as curvy as Dao’s but still, the legs of an athlete. Muscular, but not overbearingly so. Lean and taller than Dao, and maybe not as busty as the satyr, but still a busty woman. Demon. Demoness.

Neither of them had a single hair on their body anywhere, save for Jeskura’s black hair tendrils, and now that he looked harder, he realized their eyebrows weren’t hair at all. They were black-tinted skin.

Dao clicked at her a few times, and nodded before she came back over to David and sat beside him. He forced himself to not look at her naked body, but that just meant looking at Jeskura, and her naked body.

“Yeah, thanks,” she said to Dao. “Six imps and grems was kinda risky, but they left themselves wide open.” Jeskura squatted down in front of him, and he somehow found the willpower to look at her eyes, not her large breasts or her long slender stomach or her exposed sex. “Tomorrow, we’ll talk about the plan.”

For a second, he wanted to ask why everything looked so... firm. Were demons all super tough, leathery things? She didn't look leathery, but there was definitely a lack of softness to parts of her that should have been soft, same as Daoka.

"O... Okay."

Laughing again, she leaned in closer.

"Virgin?"

He gulped. "I—"

"Yeap. Oh man, that is so fucking cute, I could die. Yeah, you definitely don't belong in Hell. Fuck me, killing you would have been like killing a unicorn."

Doaka clicked several times, and scooted in closer to him. Very close. Her side pressed to his, one of her shoulder spikes nudging against his raised, pinned arm, and she reached around to run the blunt side of a claw down his chest. He didn't move. He didn't breathe.

"Don't spoil your new pet, Dao."

Daoka laughed, clicks trilling in her throat with the pleasant sound. She teased her claw up and down his chest some more, tracing the lines of his lean muscles, before setting it to his lips and gently plucking on them.

"You two are... a lot nicer, than I ever expected demons to be." Not that he expected demons to exist at all, but once he saw angels and how nice they were, and then saw demons slaughtering humans like cattle, he had to assume they were monsters. These two very much weren't. They were... people, sort of, far as he could tell. The gargoyle even talked just like a person.

The gargoyle shrugged as she sat on the bed, less than ten feet away, and again hooked her wings around her shoulders and neck like a cape.

"Demons can be nice. Nothing in the rulebook says we can't be nice."

"Being a demon isn't enough of a reason?" he asked, half eyeing the satyr as she leaned in closer, and inspected him, one of her claws tracing paths down his closer shoulder, his chest, and his abs. He couldn't tell if she found him attractive, or if she was inspecting him like a judge would inspect a dog at a dog show. But, she was wearing a smile, and as overwhelmingly different her body was, it was a very feminine, enticing smile, on a very feminine, enticing body.

Jesus fucking christ David. First day in Hell and you're already thinking with your dick.

“Humans got us all wrong,” Jeskura said. “Demons can be pretty damn violent, but it’s not like we’re innately evil or anything. At least, I don’t think so. We just love fighting, and fucking.” Shrugging, she pointed at him with her tail. “Humans come down here with the mark of the Beast and their corrupted resonance. Food for us. But I ain’t ever seen a demon with the mark. It’s humans who’re the really fucked up ones.”

He didn’t necessarily agree with that, or disagree.

“Resonance?”

“What demons eat.” She pulled out the leather bag Dao had set aside, and pulled out one of the imp or grem hearts. “Flesh isn’t like it is on the surface. It all just melts away in a day or two. It’s the resonance inside we want.”

“Melts away?”

“Questions questions. You may have noticed you’re dead and the rules have changed, right?”

“I... did.”

“’Cause now you’re in the shadow of the Great Tower—no, I’m not explaining the tower. Anyway, life is different here. You still breathe, but it’s not oxygen you’re breathing, it’s air.”

“... what?”

“And you still need to eat. But it’s not food you’re eating, it’s essence. Demons need resonance, and humans need essence.”

“... what?”

She burst out laughing again as she put the heart away. The satyr laughed too, lightly bumped her head and face bone plate visor thing against the side of his head, stood up, and joined Jeskura on the bed.

“Don’t worry about it for now. Just know you don’t need to need to piss or shit anymore, but you will need to eat, if you do anything to drain yourself, like that hike did, and the fucked shoulder.” The gargoyle motioned to his aching feet. “You’ll feel the hunger as those heal. You’ll be fine in a day or two, ready to walk again, feet toughened up, but you’ll be starving.”

“That... doesn’t make—”

“It’s the afterlife, fresh meat. You’ll get used to it.” Shrugging, she leaned in toward Daoka, gave her another very romantic kiss, and laid back on the bed. “Now sleep.”

He almost asked her why he slept as a ghost, or as someone in the afterlife or whatever, and why sleeping no longer gave him dreams. But no, just another thing for the mental list. Maybe he could ask later.

“Thanks, for... for telling me all this,” he said eventually.

Jeskura stuck her head up. “Yeah well, if you don’t cooperate with my plan, I’ll find out what a unicorn’s heart tastes like. Got it?”

He gulped, hard. “Got it.”

The two demons in bed cozied up with each other, hugging, and finding positions to lay flat on the leathery blankets, while not puncturing it with their spikes or horns; the satyr was particularly spiky. And as the cave grew quiet, it also grew darker. The amber veins weren’t as bright anymore, softening over the minutes until they weren’t any brighter than a weak night light. Timed? However it worked, it worked well, and he felt a need to sleep begin to pull him under.

Good. The moment the two demons stopped talking to him and he was left alone with his thoughts, the urge to cry came up again. He didn’t want to cry. He wanted to be back in Heaven with his sister. He wanted to be anywhere but here, even lucky as he was to get rescued by Jeskura and Daoka, if rescue was even the right word.

Sleeping was better than crying. So, even trapped in the awkward position, he slept.

Tomorrow, they were going to figure out how to kill Diogo. At least, that was their plan. His plan was saving his sister, no matter what.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Mia~~

At first, she’d been happy the big demon man had put her down instead of carrying her like a bag of sand. Now she wasn’t. Her feet screamed at her to stop walking, and she ignored them. They’d kill her if she didn’t do exactly what they said. Kill her the same way they, and other demons, had killed all those people. The same way they’d probably killed her brother.

She sniffled as tears welled up again. She'd already cried, and the two demons Brennus and Loria had barely reacted. She thought they might laugh at her, but they hadn't done that either. They were too interested in their own conversation and their plan to care about her.

Honestly, that was a big step up from how she imagined demons. She'd always figured demons didn't exist, but if they did, they'd be horribly vile, cruel, and do everything they could to inflict as much pain as possible. And it might have still been true, but so far it wasn't. The demons were more like... animals. They'd ripped people apart and tore out their hearts to eat them on the shore of the river, but they hadn't tortured them, either. Some of them had made a game of it, though, like a cat might with a mouse. So, capable of extreme cruelty, but didn't seem to lust for it?

It was a small comfort. They'd probably killed David, and they were going to kill her. But at least she wouldn't spend a thousand millennia being tortured. Then again, how did you die in Hell? How'd that even work?

She looked up at the metal pillars jutting up from the stone path. They were smooth and curving, almost like trees, and they came up from the hard ground with a strange naturalism to them, as if they'd grown. On top of them, giant black skulls of the same metal sat, with burning bushes inside them. The bushes should have burned up in seconds, but they kept burning and didn't stop.

Above her, the sky burned, too. Around her was miles and miles of harsh, jagged mountains of dark stone. The path they walked was lined with more pillars with burning bushes on top of them, with plenty of burning bushes along the stone walls without a pillar. There were bones everywhere. Not as many as the shore, but still, thousands of bones sat along the edges of the path, many of them human skulls, arranged so they all pointed toward the path. Someone had a sick sense of decor.

The path took them down, a gentle slope in a vicious land that tore at her feet with each step. Ahead waited a huge cave, with more demons standing around the entrance. Dozens of small demons about four feet tall perched on the top of the cave, all of them with bat wings, all of them wearing some degree of armor. Leather, bits of bent black metal, some had human skulls attached to them either as armor or trophies, and each and every one of them looked like they built the armor in a basement out of scrap. These were not the angels she'd seen, wearing armor beyond beautiful, shining and pristine. Instead of a well-funded army, the demons looked like ragtag militia, if militia liked chaos and violence and looking the part.

Half of the little demons above walked on hooves and had no tail, and the other half walked on raptor feet and had tails, and they all stared at her with their red and black eyes, some of them idly



plucking at their horns, or their big sharp teeth inside their too-large evil smiles. A couple of them hopped off, and glided back into the tunnel's mouth, disappearing inside.

“Probably telling Diogo,” the male demon with her said to his gargoyle friend. Mia still didn't have a good term for him. The gargoyle was obviously a gargoyle, a sexy one but still a gargoyle. The small ones she'd seen she'd heard Brennus call imps, and grems. Actually, he'd called them impas, and gremlas, and impins and gremlins. Weird species names, if that's what they were, but they did look impish, and like gremlins. Brennus, she couldn't easily classify. He was eight feet tall, walked on raptor feet, had a tail and some small spikes on his back, and had giant black horns. A mostly human body, with no wings. So just... demon, then?

In the distance, she saw a tower. It took a few minutes of walking to get any kind of sense of scale, and she gulped as she realized it was as big as the CN tower, at least. It even looked a little similar, except that it was black and red and looked like it was covered in giant spikes. The details were a haze, the tower at least a hundred kilometers away, if not more, its base hidden between some shallow mountains dotted with burning red dots; more burning bushes.

They weren't taking her to the tower though. They were taking her to a cave that was bound to be dark, dangerous, and filled with hungry demons itching to do to her what she saw the demons do to the others. And that didn't seem much better than a trek across the stones on her bleeding feet, with the sky burning above her and the warm wind almost hot enough to burn her skin.

She paused when stepping into the cave. There was a giant demon standing guard, one of the brute ones. No horns, tail, wings, or spikes. A foot taller than Brennus, super muscular, with a skull demon face that glared at her with the mindlessness of a guard who hated their job. Except, when his eyes saw her and her forehead, he snorted and looked to the two demons in front of her.

He was also naked, and Mia gulped as she looked the ridiculous thickness of his muscles and abs. No genitalia, though. Strange.

“I know, Torius,” Loria said. “We thought the same thing, too. We're taking her to Diogo, see what he makes of it.” The gargoyle looked back at Mia and motioned forward. “Walk in front of us if you don't want some devorjin or treegera asshole to snatch you up and eat you. Or rape you.”

She nodded slowly as she stepped between her two capturers, doing her best to ignore the r-word Loria said so casually.

“D... Devorjin?” she asked.

Brennus laughed as he pointed back behind them with his clawed thumb, toward the big brute they'd walked past.

“He’s a devorjin. I’m a vratorin. But the betrayers just call us brutes and vrats.”

So brute was the natural conclusion others came to for a name, then. He also said vrat with a little inflection, almost like he wanted her to notice how close it was to the word rat, and how quickly he'd kill her if she called him a rat. He didn't look anything like a rat.

“Gorgala,” Loria said, gesturing to herself. “Betrayers just call us gargoyles.”

“Betrayers?”

Brennus shoved her, not hard enough to knock her over though. She'd almost expected him to do just that. They—

She froze, knowing full well she'd get shoved again, but she couldn't help it. She stared into one of the tunnels beside her, the walls covered in glowing amber veins lighting everything, like it wanted her to see the dark, dirty secrets in the shadows.

Seven feet away, was a succubus. She knew it was a succubus instantly, with her almost perfectly human face, body, and red skin, two short black horns, and long black hair tendrils that looked closer to hair than the other demons had. She was on her stomach. Something, someone massive lay on top of her. Fucking her, pinning her down against a pile of leathery blankets, and earning mewls and whimpers of pleasure from her. Her thin tail ended with a devil spade, and it swung around wildly and happily up from between the much larger beast's legs.

The succubus smiled at Mia from underneath the giant demon. Invitingly.

Before Mia could figure who or what or how, Loria pushed her along, and she fell over this time, palms hitting the stone, wrists still bound together. Brennus picked her up and ushered her along, but she managed to get a peek into the alcove again before she lost sight of it. Two demons, fucking, out in the open, zero attempt to hide what they were doing. And in the one second she'd managed to look the succubus in the eyes, it'd been clear the succubus would have loved for her to join them.

She really hated herself sometimes. Despite everything that'd happened. Despite all the pain and misery and destroyed dreams, for some reason, she couldn't help but picture herself in the succubus's spot, underneath a giant demon, getting fucked like that.

She clenched her eyes shut for a second and shook her head. Sure, she was a horny person, right down to the soul apparently, but not so horny she could just switch on like that. What was—oh, it was

that feeling again. Just like when she'd walked up the stairs to Heaven, and an aura had come over her and David, something external that'd affected her internally and made her feel something. The same thing was happening here. Somehow her brain could tell, like how her skin could tell the difference between warmth that came from outside versus inside her own body.

Something in that room with the succubus, had been affecting her, a sexual aura. Maybe it'd been the succubus herself?

She clenched her eyes as they walked past, and thank god the sudden urge to throw herself at the nearest demon for sexy times vanished. It was an aura then, and it had a range. But it happened again, not as strongly this time but again nonetheless, as they walked past another alcove.

A female demon, almost as tall as one of those brutes, was fucking a man. A human man, with 666 written on his forehead. The demon looked like one of the demons who walked on all fours for a bit that she saw on the river shore, with a big thick tail. No wings on her either, but those claws were massive, with raptorial feet with giant talons, and Mia couldn't help but think lion or tiger, despite her mostly human face and giant black horns.

The man underneath her, between her legs, managed to meet Mia's eyes before Mia was pushed past the alcove again. He looked lost to lust, like he was drowning in the sexual aura the big demon woman was radiating. Was it her, creating the aura? It had to be.

Brennus nudged her along, and she was thankful. Whatever it was the demons did during sex, it had her mouth watering, at least until it was out of view and a dozen feet away. Then her mind snapped back to normal, to the harsh realities around her. She wasn't sure if that was better or worse.

The tunnel twisted and turned, and every so often an alcove showed a ridiculous display of sexuality. Loria and Brennus never let her stick around to watch, but each time, she got a flash peek of demons and humans mixed in a mess of flesh and bliss. She did notice the demons looked much softer and redder than the ones she saw on the shore, and the ones currently guiding her. Softer, redder, with massive things stretching out tiny holes. At one point she tried to stop and focus on what looked like another succubus having sex with a vrat, and before Loria pushed her past the alcove wall, she did get a peek at where the two demons were connected.

That couldn't be right. That... was huge.

She blinked back at Brennus, and did a double take, looking down at his leather loincloth thing, before up at him, earning a laugh from him.

"Fresh meat always has the same reaction."

“It’s cute,” Loria said. “Maybe Diogo will like her? She is very pretty.”

Brennus nodded as he smiled down at Mia, licking his sharp teeth.

“She is. Maybe we could have some fun with her if Diogo doesn’t want her?” He leaned in close to her, close enough she felt his breath on her naked body, and he half purred, half growled as he locked eyes with her. Sure enough, Loria did the same, the two of them nudging shoulders as they stared down at her.

They were attracted to her. They wanted her. They wanted to do things to her, the things she’d just seen in the alcoves. And, if what she’d seen was any indication about Brennus... She looked down at his waist again, gulped, and took a step back.

“He’ll want her, but so will Zel,” Loria said. “He’ll take her to Zel, and you know what Zel will do to him if she finds out he had a taste of her first.”

Brennus stood up straight as if someone just slapped him.

“Good point.” He pushed Mia along, the hunger and lust in his eyes gone in an instant. Whoever Zel was, he was terrified of her.

The tunnel grew larger, and darker, and ice shot up through Mia’s veins as a familiar sound echoed along the stone. Screams. It was the screams she’d heard falling through the tunnel that’d taken her to Hell.

She froze.

“Forward,” Brennus said.

“But... But...”

“It’s just remnants, fresh meat,” Loria said. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I don’t understand.”

Brennus didn’t care she didn’t understand. He pushed her forward, and she sucked in a harsh breath as they rounded a corner.

Just like in the tunnel, humans were growing out of the walls. The tunnel was bigger, but that didn’t mean anything when it was now coated in human beings, all of them reaching out with desperate hands, many with broken fingers and bleeding from gaunt skin. Human eyes stared at her, dozens, and they all reached out for her, as if she could do something to help them.

“What... is this?” she said, taking a step back. She didn’t mean to, but her body forced her, right into Brennus’s waist and armor.

“Just remnants. Ignore them, and don’t let them grab you.” He pushed her again, but not hard enough she fell within reach of any of the screaming people. “Diogo will have my hide if you die or lose an eye before he sees you.”

More ice shot up through her spine, but somehow she found the strength to walk. One bloody foot in front of the other, she followed the path on the cave floor, the stone smoothed out by what was probably hundreds of years of being walked by clawed feet. How could someone stomach walking this path frequently? One of the humans stuck out from the rock only enough for the side of their head and one arm to emerge. Another dangled overhead from their waist, and Mia had to duck to avoid getting caught.

“I got it,” Loria said, swiped out with a claw, and caught the human... the remnant, in the throat.

Their eyes rolled up as blood gushed out of them onto the stone. The rocks, the caves, it all had a dark red tint to it, and as the remnant’s blood flowed into the cracks and grooves off the side of the path, it slowly faded. It was like the stone itself absorbed the blood.

She squeaked when the remnant, now silent, fell from the ceiling. Their half body splattered on the stones, and broke apart. It was like the autopsy again, a thousand times worse, and Mia covered her mouth as she looked away, but not before getting a glimpse of organs spilling out of the corpse’s split-open gut.

“Oh god oh god oh god.”

Loria chuckled as she squatted down in front of the splattered corpse.

“Like Brennus said, it’s just a remnant. See?” She held up the body’s head. Mia managed to peek at it, for half a second. “423. Now 422. This fucker must have been a nasty rapist or murderer.”

“Or a CEO,” Brennus said, snickering.

“422?” Mia asked.

The gargoyle nodded as she stood up, and swept the body parts aside. The nearby remnants grabbed them, like people drowning, desperate to find anything that’d help them float. They tore the flesh apart, but not with any malice or even awareness. The eyes looked at Loria and Brennus, but mostly at Mia, and they ripped up the flesh thrown their way with barely a thought, eventually pushing the chunks of gore aside and reaching out to try and grab Mia again, now with freshly bloody fingers.

The numbers on their foreheads. 142. 45. 252. They ticked down whenever they died?

“What happens when the number hits zero?”

“Never seen a remnant with a zero,” Brennus said, pushing her forward again. The warm blood of the remnants coating her bleeding feet would have made her vomit if she could. “Probably returned to the Great Tower.”

Great Tower. She almost asked, but a nearby remnant almost caught her ankle. And out of reflex, she kicked the remnant in the face, hard. The woman’s face broke in, bones snapping and nose shattering, and Mia screamed as she pulled her foot away.

The remnant, just a head and arm sticking out of the stone, fell apart. The limbs broke apart at the joints, turning the woman into a soup of bits, as the number on her forehead changed from 308 to 307.

“She was... soft,” Mia said, gulping down vomit she didn’t have.

“That’s remnants for you,” Brennus said, and he swept the body parts aside with the tip of his tail as he pushed her along again. “Their bones never last. Only fresh meat’s bones do.” He grabbed one of the chains hanging from his chest strap, and bounced the skull dangling from it a few times.

Hell had its own ecosystem of violence and insanity.

They kept walking, and Mia did a better job avoiding the remnants. Some of them managed to speak, but the words were garbled nonsense. Mostly. She did her best to ignore the ones that called out names, or for their mom or dad, but underneath the half choked, half screamed noise, she heard them.

Eventually the tunnel opened up more, and the amount of remnants nearby dropped off to almost nothing. No longer a tunnel, but a full cave, big and open, with an enormous throne in the back center.

The decoration motif went from bad to worse. A few remnants grew out of the stone ceiling above, but a few also sat inside cages that dangled from the ceiling from chains. They looked like people, fully intact, but a second glance proved they were remnants, sputtering and groaning, twitching inside their bird cages. The metal bars that held them were rusty dark metal, and drops of blood fell from them onto the stone, drawn from the remnants by their serrated and spiky inner edges. 589. 542.

Chains hung from other places on the ceiling and walls, covered in barbs, many with skulls dangling from their bases and hooks. Mostly human, but more than a few skulls looked demon, complete with massive sharp teeth, and black horns. More than a few hung from alcove entrances, almost like bead curtains... of death.

Demons stood by, watching, guarding. A couple brutes, naked, and again with no genitalia of any kind, with enormous muscular bodies almost pure black. But she'd seen one of the brutes naked and having sex, and a lot of his body had been red, and not a Ken doll.

One of the demons looked like a gargoyle demon, but different, no arms, but her wings were arms instead. A bat demon? She hung upside down from one of the cages, ignoring the remnant inside drooling and bleeding from broken fingernails. 631. High numbers for the people in cages.

The throne itself was a seat carved into the slope of rock against the back wall, and it was massive. And the person who sat in it was, too. Another brute, naked, and nearly ten feet tall. Huge even compared to the other brutes. The demons she'd seen having sex all looked redder, but this brute was almost pure solid black. If the color of the skin meant how hard or tough it was, this brute — probably Diogo — was as hard as stone.

A succubus sat on the right arm of the throne, wearing a loose piece of... silk? White silk, partly see-through, something that hung over her shoulders and was tied across her breasts so it dangled loosely over her legs. An incubus sat the throne's left arm, with the same sort of ridiculous, perfect proportions the succubus had. Not as tall as an angel, but the red skin and short black horns did absolutely nothing to detract from his perfect, lean, muscular, fashion model physique and face. Both had thin devil tails ending in spades, and they waved slowly behind them as both looked to Mia. Their jaws dropped.

Diogo stared down at her with eyes too small for his huge skull-like demon face, and he slid his jaw to the side slightly, causing his huge teeth to click once. She'd become the center of attention.

“Diogo,” Brennus said, “look what I found out by Adam's Blood.” He shoved her forward, and Mia stumbled. She almost fell to her knees, but managed to get her bound hands out and press against Diogo's right shin. Hard as metal.

She slowly looked up at the colossal monster, and gulped. He was literally twice her height. And somehow, despite the lack of horns or wings or tail or spikes, he looked more terrifying than any of the other demons. No genitalia though. A good thing, hopefully.

“She's unmarked,” he said, voice rolling over her with enough bass she felt her teeth vibrate.

“Yeah. Thought that might interest you, or Zel.”

Mia forced herself to stand up straight as she looked up at the titan, ignoring the beautiful creatures on his throne's arms. The demon with muscles as big as her entire body was a little more distracting for the moment.

Diogo leaned down toward her, set an elbow on his leg, and frowned. The fact his skull-like demon face was capable of bending to show emotion made him more scary, not less. He raised an eyebrow, and from so close, she saw the bald creature didn't even have eyebrows. The skin was just slightly darker there, too.

“Why are you unmarked?”

“I... don't know.”

He growled, and Mia shivered as the vibration went up through her legs.

“Start talking, fresh meat,” Diogo said, “or I will simply eat you and be done with it. I am sure an unmarked must taste unique.”

He didn't know what an unmarked would taste like, and from how everyone was staring at her, it was the first time any of them had seen an unmarked person. Not a deal breaker for getting eaten or killed, though. If demons had any rules they followed, she didn't see any. They weren't going to return her to Heaven because of the mistake that'd sent her here.

God, she hoped it was a mistake.

“I... I was at the gate of Heaven.” Better to not mention David. If he was still alive, she wanted to keep it that way. “I'd just died, so I walked up the white stairs and got to the gates. But when I tried to enter, it blocked me. All the people there, and the angels, they were all confused. No one knew what was happening, and then suddenly a portal opened under me, and dropped me off... here.”

“In Hell,” Diogo said with a quiet, all-too-sinister chuckle. “That is very unusual.” Nodding to himself, he leaned back in his throne, still watching her with his red and black eyes. “A wise move, Brennus, bringing her to me.”

Mia managed a quick peek over her shoulder at Brennus. The vrat put on a smile, half nodding half bowing to the giant brute, and he gestured to Mia with his tail.

“I didn't see any other unmarked, but a lot more demons than Loria and me were there at the drop. Some humans got away, too.”

Diogo snarled. “Last thing I need is more fresh meat joining that idiotic cult.”

Loria nodded and fluttered her wings a couple times.

“I did kill a Cain worshiper yesterday,” she said, “but the problem is getting worse. Won't be long before they start attacking, probably around Adam's Blood.”



“Agreed,” Diogo said. “Caera, I’m going on a trip come rekindling. Get out here.”

One of the demons watching from a high alcove climbed down the wall, head first, like a cat, huge claws digging into the stone grooves on the rock before it leveled out. She sauntered toward Mia on all fours, wearing the same sort of armor as a lot of the demons, black metal chunks and big demon skulls strapped to her with leather straps. She had two big black horns, black tendril hair, and spikes covered her spine, her armor conveniently avoiding the spikes that ran all the way down to her very thick tail.

She stood up on her hind legs once she got close, and Mia stared up while Caera looked down. She had a big scar across the right side of her face, and it left a nasty dent in her right horn, too. And she had a very slight snout, not enough to make her look inhuman but just enough to give her a slightly catlike face; lion or tiger, not house cat. Combined with the wide mouth filled with very sharp teeth, she looked awesome, sexy, and terrifying.

“Field trip?” she asked, voice deeper than the gargoyle’s, but nowhere near as deep as Diogo’s. “We going somewhere?”

“I’m visiting Zelandariel. She’ll want to see this unmarked. You’re staying here and keeping these idiots in line.”

Zelandariel. What a mouthful. No wonder Brennus called her Zel.

Caera frowned as she continued to look at Mia while talking to Diogo.

“That’ll take four days, one way.”

“It will.”

“And if those Cain fuckers attack while you’re gone?”

“That’s why I’m leaving you in charge.” Nodding, he gestured to Caera. “In the meantime, keep an eye on the unmarked. If I wake to find her dead tomorrow, I’ll be having your heart for breakfast.”

After a few seconds that snapped tight with tension, Caera sighed and nodded.

“Alright.” The tall demon motioned for Mia to come. “You’re staying with me tonight, then. Don’t want anyone eating you and getting me killed.”

Nodding, Mia forced herself to not gulp as she stepped up to the woman, and then beside her as Caera ushered her toward the big hole in the wall she’d climbed down from. Caera stuck close behind her, and growled at the other nearby demons as they walked past them. Not a very stable or trusting group. Good, that’d make things easier.

Mia had to do what they said. She had to shut up, and just do what everyone said. If Diogo was taking her on a long trip through the mountains to see his boss, then even with a bunch of demons helping him, that'd be her best chance.

And when she found the opportunity, she'd kill him, escape, and find her brother.