

1091

"Okay, so assuming you were born in the early 1960s, that means you're... probably around sixty years old?"
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"I guess, yeah."

"You uh... you look good, for sixty years old."

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

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

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

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

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

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

This, was the shit Dante wrote about.

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

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

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

"Dao's right. Don't feel bad for remnants, fresh meat." Jes raised a hand, aiming for one of the remnants, and--

"Don't!"

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

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

"Cannibalism?"

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

Jeskura slashed her claws across the remnant's face, and they ran deep. Soft flesh. Soft bone. The remnant died instantly, desperate eyes rolling up before the whole body fell apart. The joints tore apart, skin and flesh fell away from the bones, and the pile of gore splattered on the rocks.  
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The number on the forehead changed, from 426, to 425.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It's Hell!" He yanked his hand away from another remnant, and hissed as the woman's fingernails cut his skin. She'd probably lost her fingernails to do it, but he didn't look back to check. "There has to be some purpose to it all, right?"  
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"Oh, that's what this is about? 'Cause I can tell you right now, even the oldest tetrad demon doesn't know the answer. If there's a purpose to Hell, it's long forgotten. If God exists, the asshole hasn't shown himself in fucking ages." She shrugged, like it was a perfectly acceptable thing for her entire plane of existence to not make sense.

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

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

"No God?"

"No God."

"Just... wow, really?"

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

"But..."

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

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

"Wait, so... you know for sure Lucifer existed?"