

### 1106

Caera waited for them in a ditch crevice, high up on a mountain side. Getting to her had been a pain, but his feet were even tougher now, and more than a few times he'd stepped on a rock edge and been fine. A far cry from hooves, but still, it was damn amazing he felt comfortable scaling an actual, jagged, rocky mountain barefoot, exhausting as it was.

Why getting exhausted didn't make him hungry, but recovering from an injury would, was yet another mystery. *Www.Noave(w)cRm.coM*

"Made us drag our asses all the way up here," Jes said as she hopped down into the crevice. "Fueled up and ready for the journey?"

"I am," the tiger lady said. She lay on her stomach, hands under her chest, head up, like a cat lazying about.

She really was a lovely creature. The black spikes on her back that ran along her spine, between the leather straps of her armor, all the way down to the end of her oddly thick tail, gave her a very alien creature vibe, but she was mostly humanoid in shape besides that. Mostly, with arms just long enough she could use them as legs, and a face that carried just a hint of cat-like bone structure.

Plus, she was huge. Standing near her felt he'd taken a trip to the zoo, and through some weird accident, now stood in one of the pens with a large tiger, or any other huge creature that could kill him with one swipe of the claws. She was intriguing.

"I picked this spot," Caera said once Daoka hopped into the little ravine with them, "because it cuts across the Gorzen Mountains from a higher vantage point. I don't want to stumble into Diogo. We want to ambush him, right? Not get ourselves killed."

"I could have handled it," Jes said. "I always do."

"You nearly got yourself killed, last time."

"But I didn't."

"And Zel isn't too happy with you because--"

The gargoyle slapped the ground with her tail. *Www.Noave(w)cRm.coM*

"Zel can kiss my ass."

Caera rolled her eyes, but her tail wagged lightly. Whatever strange relationship she had with the gargoyle, there was more to it than angry words. It almost sounded like a friend being angry with another for being a dumbass who couldn't plan anymore than five seconds into the future. Maybe Caera was smart?

"So, we stick to the mountains," the tiger said. "I know a path. When we near the spire, we reevaluate. Maybe Diogo will return quickly, and we can surprise him then. Maybe he won't, and we'll have to reassess."

David raised a hand. Everyone looked at him, both the ladies with eyes cocking a brow like he was insane.

"Christ, fresh meat," Jes said, "just talk."

"I... wanted to know, you seem pretty strong. Right?"

Caera smiled, knowingly. "I am."

"Strong enough to fight Diogo?"

"No. He's a devorjin, and a big one. I can maybe, maybe kill one other devorjin in a fight, but there's a reason a big devorjin is the bailiff of Gorzen Mountains, David."

He nodded, forcing down a smile as she called him by his name. Her voice was nice. A bit deeper than Jeskura's, with less... punch.

"So, if we really want to kill Diogo, our only option is to--"

"Drop a rock on his head," Jes said, poking him with one of her wings' thumb claws. "Like I said. Or maybe trick those Cainite cultists fucks into fighting Diogo? Give them his position or something?"

"This isn't a cartoon," he said. "And I know you know what those are."

Daoka chuckled, hopped in closer, and sat down next to Caera. She clicked away, gesturing in a direction.

"I doubt that'll work," Caera said. "Those Cainian bastards aren't going to listen. And even if they did, I'm helping you, because you're going to help me kill them. You want revenge for Leos. I want revenge for Kia and Marquez. Remember?"

Daoka sighed, nodding, and clicked softly a few times.

"Dao's right," Jes said. "Ever since they died, you've really had a stick up your ass, Caera."

"You have nerve," Caera slammed her tail against the ravine wall, and unlike Jes's tail, it made a big impact. Thunk. "Leos died and--"

"And I haven't let that stop me from doing my thing. You used to be fun, you know?"

Uh oh, that sounded suspiciously like one friend berating another. He inched away a little.

Caera growled in her throat. *Www.Noave(w)cRm.coM*

"What if Daoka died?"

Jes opened her mouth, closed it, looked at Dao, sighed, and shook her head.

"Point taken."

Caera looked ready to say more. Probably something like 'Leos wasn't a real friend if his death isn't stopping you'. Or maybe she wasn't. She was hard to read, like someone who maybe did used to be 'fun' like Jes said, but now, wasn't. Mia could have figured her out on the spot. He couldn't.

"What's our contingency plan?" he asked. All three of them looked at him like he'd just spoken an alien language. "So, the plan is, we go to the spire, and figure out where Diogo goes next. But what if he doesn't go anywhere? Or what if he leaves, with a bunch of new demons from Zel to help him on his trek back? What if... any number of things go wrong?"

"David," Jes said, "the fuck did I say last night? We deal with shit when it comes up, not before."

"That's a great way for shit to go badly and for no one to get what they want!"

"Bullshit. Sitting around planning and doing nothing is how you don't get what you want!"

Daoka clicked a couple times, earning a groan from Jes.

"Jes," Caera said, "the kid makes a point."

"I'm... not a kid."

"You're small enough I could fit you in my pocket, David," the giant pocketless demon said. But she did grin after looking him up and down a couple times. "You're in great shape though, for a little guy. You and your sister."

"Thanks," he said, suppressing the urge to squirm as his pale, freckled skin blushed. "We uh... we both wanted to live for a long time. Get laid a lot, and live a long time. We... did neither."

The three demons chuckled.

"Lot of humans like that," Caera said, shrugging. "So he's yours, Daoka?"

Daoka nodded as she clicked a couple times, sat closer to David, and rubbed one of her big ram horns against his head.

"Cute little pipsqueak. Fuck him yet?"

Daoka nodded, a big happy smile on her face. David blushed more until his heartbeat pulsed in his face.

Before he could stop her, Daoka went on a clicking spree, complete with enthusiastic nods, hand gestures indicating size, and eventually held up her four fingers and thumb; she only had three fingers and a thumb per hand, so she used both hands.

"Not only that," Jes said, "the kid's got the craziest aura. You were right about the tingling sensation coming from him, Caera, but it got so much crazier. Dao and I were just swept up in it like a couple youngsters meeting our first incubus. Couldn't help ourselves. Couldn't even think. Just, had to have him." Almost purring, Jeskura licked her lips as she looked at him.

Caera's eyes slowly opened wider and wider, until she aimed her red and black gaze at David.

"You're... not human?"

"I'm human! I... think? I was born, but my mom gave me and my sister up before we knew her. I had to eat and drink and sleep. I went to school. I did normal, human things. I had a perfectly normal anatomy!"

"Had," Jeskura said, chuckling as she pat his leg. "Fucker nearly broke me in half. I haven't been fucked that deep in decades, not since I worked for Zel."

Dao clicked a couple times as she hugged David from behind, half resting her weight against him as she rubbed the side of her closest horn against the top of his head some more.

"I have to be human, right? I mean, yeah sure, the way I died was weird."

"It was?" Caera asked.

No point in not explaining it. If anything, Caera was his best chance at getting some answers. He told her the story of how he died, and didn't spare a single detail. The days since, the things he saw as a ghost, the autopsy, the walk up the stairs to Heaven, walking into the gate, being sucked down into Hell, everything.

"Same story Mia told me," Caera said. "You're sure one of the angels said 'not again?'"

"Yeah. Whatever happened to me and Mia had to happen to someone else before, right?"

"Maybe. The angel could have just meant something similar had happened, not the same thing." The tiger shrugged as she stood up, and David had to look way way up to meet her eyes. "I've read about a lot of things, David. I've read about the Nine Spires War, the Second Age, and even found a few runes about the First Age. I've read things about Cain, and I've read things about the Old Ones. I even once found something that spoke about Lucifer, and the vortex they created. But I have never, ever read about an unmarked human, or about a human with... physiology like yours."

Fuck. It'd been a long shot, hoping some random demon would know all the secrets and answers to the questions he had, the big ones anyway.

"She might not know that," Jes said, "but Caera knows a lot of shit about a lot of shit. If you really want to know about how Hell works, bother her about it." And like she'd just settled a debate, the gargoyle hopped back to her feet, too. "Now come on. We gotta get to the spire. It's a four day trek, and we might even catch up to Diogo on the way. We can do all that planning bullshit while we move."

Daoka hopped up too, and held out a hand. David took it, matching her smile. If shit hit the fan, Daoka would help him. Jes and Caera, he wasn't sure about yet, but the satyr, he could trust her.

He gave her hand a small squeeze. Daoka smiled bright, clicked a few quiet times, and returned the squeeze.

"I want to see your physical changes, too," Caera said, a tiny, mischievous smile on her face, aimed down directly at him. "For knowledge's sake, of course."

He gulped.

Daoka chuckled up at the tiger demon, clicking. *Www.Noave(w)cRm.coM*

"Yeah," Jes said, and she poked him with her tail before climbing out of the small crevice. "With this pervert, that's pretty much guaranteed."