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"She made meera?" he asked.

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

"Mixed with demon bones?"

"Fresh human bones work, too. Not remnant bones, though."

"Bones? What? That... doesn't sound like good alloying."

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

"The fuck is alloying?"

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

Caera laughed. "Hell doesn't give a shit about chemistry, David."

"I guess not."

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

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

"Who is he?"

Dao clicked a couple times, and rested her cheek on top of his head*www.0ve1W0rM.com*

"He's a tetrad demon, a gorujin," Caera said. "A young one, but even a young tetrad is a problem for everyone."

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

That sounded kind of badass, and scary.

"Why's he want Daoka?"

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

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

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

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

"Leos didn't give her up, when Diogo found out Dao was hiding with me. Diogo killed him."

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

"Diogo and Tacitus are both bastards," Caera said. "Zel is, too, but Diogo and Tacitus are reachable. We can kill them, if we're smart about it."*www.NoVe1W0rM.com*

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

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

"Do they have guns in Hell?" he asked.

"Nope."

"I'm starting to think demons watch the scrying pools... a lot."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Saldavin? Gorlus?"

"Her two new best friends," Caera said. "She met them... ten years ago? Two more tetrads, both korgejin. With so many tetrad working for her, Zel's gotten full of herself. It won't be long before she binds people to a horde, and sends us into the Black Valley to fight Alessio or something."*www.NoVe1W0rM.com*

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

"What do korgejin look like?"

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

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

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

"What's a horde? How does that work?"

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

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

"Zel gave me this, over a hundred years ago."

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

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

Ah fuck. He had to.

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

Caera blinked at him. "*www.NoVe1W0rM.com*"

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

Caera stared at him like he'd exploded.

"David," Jes said, groaning, "you are brain damaged."

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

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

"You are too damn cute."

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

"Thanks," he gasped.