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"I need a weapon," he whispered.

"Think you can lift one?" Caera managed a weak shrug, before motioning him to follow. They weren't following paths anymore. You couldn't hunt on a path. If you wanted to catch someone and kill them, you had to get off the beaten path and go looking, and Death's Grip had plenty of places to do that.

Sharp pain shot up his leg.

"Fffff--" He bit down the word and yanked his foot up. A drop of blood dripped from under his big toe, and one of the bloodgrip vines shifted as he pulled his weight off it. "God damn it," he whispered.

Caera smiled down at him, and brushed aside some of the fucking stupid plant that lay in their path.

"Are you strong enough to lift a meera sword or axe?"

"Barely. But I'm not heavy enough to make it work anyway." With a second to adjust, Caera waiting for him, David brushed off his now slightly bleeding foot, his cloak, his half-chest armor, and resumed the climb. "But I've been thinking. Can you break meera metal?" He tapped the battered and bent chunk of black metal covering one side of his chest. It dinged quietly. It was very thin, and still kinda heavy and annoying.

"Sure. It's durable, but it can break. Why?"

"I was thinking." He pulled on a big rock, and half jumped to join her on the next ledge. "Find me a meera sword, and break it in half. Should drop the weight a lot, and bring the center of gravity in a lot closer to me."

"Center of--I'll take your word for it."

He grinned at the tiger lady. She was smart, a lot smarter than Jes or Dao, but not smart in the same way he was. And judging from the playful smile -- full of giant sharp teeth -- she gave him, she liked that. Who knew he'd have an easier time getting along with demons than humans?

"Is it doable for us? Break a sword in half or something?"

"No idea. It'll be tricky, but I'm sure we'll find you a sword sooner or later."

"I had one before. Jes and Dao wouldn't let me keep it."

She chuckled, and had to fight to keep it quiet. [www.nOvEl@orM.Com](#)

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't trust you blindly either, back then."

"And now?" [www.nOvEl@orM.Com](#)

"Now, I think both you and your sister are completely clueless about what's going on. But you also both seem like very nice, very naive humans, who really have no place in Hell."

He nodded and sighed, and climbed the next rock after the tiger.

"Thanks, I guess."

She winked at him, and half prowled, half slithered over the next rock, so low to the ground she dragged her stomach and some of her armor over the stone. Without even bothering to look, she brushed aside more bloodgrip, often twisting her tail so she could use the spikes along its top to nudge the horrible plant out of the way. It didn't take an expert to see the woman was comfortable hunting, very comfortable. She was at least a century old, so there was that. [www.nOvEl@orM.Com](#)

"You know where you're going?" he asked.

She gestured to some of the plants. "I'm not the only one who's moved these."

Would you look at that. True to her word, there were some lines carved into the dirt, and scratches against the rocks. The thorns on bloodgrip were so tough, they could scratch stone, and a bunch of them meant someone had moved the vine out of the way.

"Recent?"

She nodded, held a finger to her lips, and took a deep obvious breath through her nose. She smelled something.

It was easy to treat this hunting trip as just something he needed to do, at least until the reality hit him. He and the tiger demon, were on a trip out to kill someone. Humans, or demons, probably humans. For all his ability to over-think everything, but keep the emotional reality out of the way, it rushed him like an ocean wave now, complete with its icy stab. It couldn't be like last time, where he'd just frozen and let Dao and Jes kill the humans. He needed to be useful.

He hoped they found some grems and imps to kill. Demons seemed a little easier on his soul to hurt. Or at least, grems and imps did, that first day. Now that he'd been hanging around with demons, would he freeze if Caera asked him to stab a satyr like Dao? To kill a gargoyle like Jes?

Hopefully not. Far as he could tell, Dao, Jes, and Caera were a lot nicer than most demons. In Hell, there was zero reason to feel bad about killing someone. It was Hell. Survival of the fittest, in a world where everyone was either a flesh-hungry demon, or a deplorable human being.

He tightened his fists, clenched his teeth, and followed Caera into a small cave.

Hell was cruel. For obvious reasons, sure, but for not-so-obvious reasons, too. The entrance to the small cave, low enough he had to crouch and get on his hands, was dark, with no amber veins. And it had bloodgrip. Caera did her best to push the stuff aside, but she didn't want to make noise, either. That left it up to David to avoid getting punctured.

He got punctured. Another thorn, this one in the palm. He clenched his teeth hard enough to make his dentist cry, but he made no noise. It only bled for a second, not a deep wound, and the skin didn't take long to seal over well enough he'd be fine if he didn't put too much pressure on it. Quick healing for minor wounds. Normal in Hell, according to the girls. But he was getting hungrier, too.

Eventually the tunnel opened wider, and amber veins revealed themselves. They glowed bright, indicating the time of day, and they lit up the dark stone and the chunks of black rock mixed into the brown and red. Enough light to see again, and avoid bloodgrip vines. But the tunnel twisted and turned harshly. He could never see any further than ten feet, which was usually occupied by Caera's big butt and thick tail.

But he heard something, and it wasn't Caera. The tiger was probably three hundred pounds, but she didn't make a sound, not even breathing; she was breathing, just damn quietly. The few pieces of armor she wore, chunks of that meera metal strapped snug to limbs and her chest with leather, would have made a fair amount of clanks and dings if they hit any part of the tunnel as she prowled. They didn't. Damn she was good, even with her injury.

The tunnel opened more, until David had enough room to get in beside Caera's tail. Nice and low, nice and slow, each step a deep crouch half supported by his hands, while his cloak didn't make a sound as it dragged along the stone. When he heard his own breathing, he forced himself to breath slower, and open his breathing passages as best he could. Only when he could hear his heartbeat in his ears, could he hear the reason Caera had come to a stop.

People were ahead, chatting. Demons? He couldn't tell. Too far to be nothing but murmurs to his ears.

Caera handed him a big rock. He took it, and had to use a lot of strength to one-hand it, but it was clear what Caera wanted. Follow her, and when she created the opportunity, use the rock. Throw it? He wasn't a hobbit. No, Caera expected him to attack someone with it directly.

He squeezed the big rock, and nodded. Don't think about it, just do it.

They continued along. Boulders occasionally blocked their path until they got further, and found the path continued around them. Perfect places for ambushes, and Caera knew it. At one point, she paused, and took something apart with her hands. A pile of bones, arranged like a house of cards. A sound trap? Caera looked back to him, and mouthed -- with her deceptively wide and shark-like mouth -- 'humans'. He nodded.

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