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"Why?" He stared at the tregeera, and then back down at the old man he'd killed. "I killed..." The words were meaningless, especially to a denizen of Hell. This was a normal thing for her.

Caera sighed and shook her head, short black tendrils bouncing around lightly between her horns. Which of course instantly made her groan and clutch her head with her bloody hand.

"Fuck me," she said. "I need to lie down. Let's get back to the others." And with all the casualness of a farmer taking cows to the slaughter, she turned around, and got to work on the bodies.

"..." He clenched his fists and looked away. He knew this would happen, that he'd have to kill other humans. And he knew it'd suck, too. But something in his guts told him what he did was fucked up, wrong, and he should do everything in his power to fix the mistake. Every god damn fucking fiber in his whole body told him what he just did was inhuman.

So much for intellectualizing. Sighing and swallowing down the nausea, he forced his eyes back to the symbols on the wall. Focus on something else. Ignore what just happened. He could have a mental breakdown when Dao and Jes and Caera were fed and healing*www.VEL@RM.C.COM*

"Did you want to read these?" he asked, gesturing to the symbols on the walls. Hundreds of scratch marks, runes, and some glowing amber runes centered on the big back wall of the alcove.

"I glanced at them," she said, between the crunching sound of a breaking sternum. "Pretty old stuff. No wonder they were trying to read them. Fucking Cainites convinced they can find something about Cain in them."

"They can read them? They--" Oh. He could read them, too. "Thee... yonder..." Oh shit it got worse. "Georn... seofen? The fuck is--oh I get it. This is old English. Like, really old English."

"That's how English-speaking humans read it. You see it as an old version of your language. It's Estian, though, a much, much older version than old English. By tens of thousands of years, probably."

"Everyone speaking Estian has got to be the most... I don't know, weird thing about Hell. And... Heaven, now that I think about it. The angels all spoke to me in English, but were they speaking Estian?"

"Probably." More crunch crunch, and a few kasplat noises. He did not look.

"You can read this old Estian stuff?"

"Barely. I worked at it for decades." She lifted her head long enough to glance his way. "The Estian runes are talking about three spire rulers who got in a fight at some point. Probably during the spires war. Nothing important."

He stroked his chin. Ah, yes, quite, the spires war, mmmm mmmm.

More crunching noises. He twisted a little to put his back to the gory mess.

"We got lucky," Caera said. "Just a small group. They'd probably camped here for a few weeks now, deciphering." She chuckled softly. "I bet the morons were trying to decipher the ancient runes, too."

"Ancient runes?" He looked her way. Oh god fucking damn it, why did he look her way? Her big teeth dripped with blood, and he saw her throat just long enough to see the small bulge go down its length. A fed tiger was a happy tiger, and it meant she'd be able to keep him alive all the better, but he was happier not thinking about her big smile and many, sharp, big teeth ripping into human flesh.

You're in Hell, David. Get over it.

"The amber runes, in the middle of the wall there, those are ancient ones. Not all the amber vein runes are from the ancient language, but all ancient language is written with amber veins. Tapping into the amber veins to write runes is something no one's done in thousands and thousands of years."

He nodded, smiling as he listened. She was nerding-out over what she liked. If he wanted, she'd go on and on about the subtle differences between the words at different points in history, probably. He knew the feeling, not for this specific topic, but he knew all too well what it was like to rant at someone about something he liked.

"So ancient is... another language?"

"Far as I can tell, yes."

"Does it have a name?"*www.VEL@RM.COM*

"No, everyone calls it the ancient language."

He nodded, and ran his eyes down the normal, non-glowing runes. They were big things with hard edges that ended in sharp points, not exactly a language full of nuance and detail, and how his brain managed to turn them into English letters and words, and very old English letters and words, he didn't know. Someone had carved them into the stone using a chisel or something, and they hadn't done a good job. It wasn't some sort of epic retelling by some powerful wise demon, sharing knowledge for a new generation of demons. It was done probably by a small group of demons hiding out in the cave, like some small tribe; Death's Grip was all too similar to some ancient human civilizations, areas filled with small tribes of 'barbarians' that weren't always too kind to each other.

The amber runes between the scratched-in runes, on the other hand, were a different matter entirely. It flowed, beautiful symbols that lined up with each other in a dance, and many of the symbols looked like the one burned onto Caera's shoulder, flowing lines ending in sharp points. Did it read left to right, right to lead, up to down? No idea, but it was obvious it'd been there on the wall long, long before the other symbols. Now that he had a second to look around, he could see the curvature of the cave walls, the three tunnels connecting with the room, all of it was either directly or indirectly pointing at the glowing symbols.

This wasn't some random cave in a tunnel network. This was a room you came to read the runes. Were the runes placed here because of that, or were the tunnels made because of the runes? Hell was alive apparently, so--

It clicked, like a light switch in his brain. Recognition. He blinked. A lot. Slowly, he stepped over the closest body, and came up to the glowing amber runes.

"David?"

He stared, lungs frozen. His hand reached out and touched the lines of the glowing veins. Amber veins were always warm, sometimes even too hot to touch, and these were no different. Like Caera said, runes made with amber veins, a lost art.

"These are... ancient runes?" he asked*www.VEL@RM.COM*

"Yes. I said that already. What's wrong with you?"

"You've... seen these runes before? In this specific cave, I mean?"

"Pretty sure, yes. Years ago, but I remember finding these. They're not nearly as well hidden as others. Why?"

He stared at the runes, the alien language, and ran a finger along one of their edges.

"Lucifer... and... Belial... lay scars... upon the stone... deep, and tall, choking life from... all within." Quiet thumps filled his hearing. His heartbeat again. "Death's Grip."