

1138

He expected Caera to say something, maybe scream with excitement, or laugh at him and say he was joking. But, when he looked back at her, she just sat there, staring at him, mouth half open with a couple drops of blood falling from her lips.

"... what?" she asked, red and black eyes wider than he'd ever seen.

"That's what... the other runes say, these glowing ones." He looked back at them, tilting his head to the side. Readable. Why were they readable? He looked around the room at the other runes that'd been carved by a chisel or something, and how rough they were, with their hard edges. Chicken scratches his brain turned into English. It was like the afterlife was some sort of reverse Tower of Babel, forcing him to understand something he shouldn't have been able to.

But the other runes, the ancient language written in amber, it was different. The strange symbols flowed into his brain, and became... became. English didn't come into it, the symbols just were, a language he didn't know but knew. Like, waking up one day and being completely fluent in a second language, able to think in its terms, its shapes, its inflections *Ww.N(ø)VéŁWôRm.C.m*

"You can read that?" she asked after a heavy silence, and walked over to him on her hands and feet. "The glowing runes?"

"I, uh... I mean, I uh... can. Easily."

"Easily!?" She stood up, placed a hand against the wall of the cave, and gestured to it with the other as she looked down at him. "It took me decades to learn how to read old Estian. I... don't even know where to begin with the ancient language."

"It's not ancient... I mean, it probably is, but it's not an ancient form of Estian. It's something else."

"How do you know?"

"Because my brain isn't interpreting it as English. It's, just... another language."

She lowered herself back down onto her hands, never taking her eyes off him.

"Another language you speak?"

"Yeah... and not French."

"French? What does that have to do with anything?"

"Canadian joke, don't worry about it." He shook his head, and ran a finger along some of the symbols. "They're... They're in my head. The runes, I mean. They're in there, and they... mean... something, on their own. They're in there, and I can see them, and think them, and they mean... stuff."

"Mean... stuff." Groaning, Caera reached out and grabbed his wrist. Wet warmth coated his skin, and he stared down at the red liquid that now dripped from his palm and fingers. A heart. "Eat."

"I--"

"Assuming you're not lying to me, and far as I can tell you're the last person in Hell who'd lie about anything, you can read the ancient language. That means there's no way I'm letting you die, David, even if I have to force-feed you. Eat. Now."

He winced as he met her eyes. Hard, stern, the sort of eyes he gave Mia when he took away her energy drinks and told her to drink water. She wasn't going to take no for an answer.

He looked down at the hunk of flesh in his hand, and sighed.

"How does it taste?"

"From the betrayers who've eaten them, they say it tastes like a forbidden fruit."

He squinted at her with one eye. "Are you lying to me? *Ww.N(ø)VéŁWôRm.C(ø)m*

She rolled her eyes. "They also said it tastes a little stronger. There, satisfied?"

A little stronger. The fruit he'd eaten had tasted like almost-raw meat, and he'd liked it. And if eating another human's heart sent the same satisfying, almost tinglingly pleasant sense of fulfillment through him, he wasn't sure he could take that. This was cannibalism *(w)w.N(ø)VéŁWôRm.C(ø)m*

Except, not really? This was the afterlife. Different rules. Or maybe he was just telling himself that to make what he was about to do okay? Just like killing those two people?

This is Hell. Get over yourself.

He bit into the heart. He had to bite it, because Caera had given him an entire heart, and it'd take a few big mouthfuls to get the whole thing down. Worse was that it fought him, tried to not tear when he pulled at it, but he bit hard, desperate to get this over with as quickly as possible. Flesh tore, and a chunk of the meat was now between his cheeks.

And it did taste good. It tasted more than good. It tasted great, just as good as the fruit, like a marinated steak with salt and pepper and other sauces and... He frowned down at the heart and the blood it leaked between his fingers, and finished it off quickly. Don't think about it. Don't think about what you did with the rock minutes ago. Get the flesh down.

He did. And hated every minute he enjoyed it. What the fuck.

"That was... too easy," he said.

The tiger chuckled as she stood up on her hind legs, four hearts in her hands, and walked for the exit.

"All betrayers say that. Come on, let's go."

"I'm not a betrayer."

"No, you're definitely not. You're not human, either. No one can read those old runes, David."

"I..."

"Plus, you've got an aura, and it changed during the fight. For a second there, it wasn't the constant horny aura you put out like sex is the only thought in your head. For a moment, I felt... something a whole lot different, right when you hit the woman with the rock."

He did not look back at the corpses, with ripped open chests. Six dead, two of them his kills. One, because he'd caught them unawares. Another, because they were old, and starving. They'd died old, came to Hell with a weak body, and he'd bashed their face in with a rock.

How the fuck was he supposed to 'get over himself' over shit like this? This was--

His vision flashed white, and blurred in a maelstrom of images. Noises, voices, scenes he recognized. A street. A sidewalk. Someone pushing someone else into the traffic. His hands. Her hands?

"Fuck!" He stumbled back. His legs. David's legs, not the woman's. His ass on the stone ground, not a street. But there was a street, and a woman's hands in front of him. And someone who'd just been hit by a car, and had their head splattered on the asphalt.

"David? David, you okay?" Caera was with him in a second, squatting down beside him and using the flat side of her big tail to hold him up. Her hands were a bit busy, holding hearts.

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