

1266

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"I saw a demon who wasn't frothing at the mouth full of rage or hunger, a demon willing to actually talk. That seemed like a step up from the demons I saw on the battlefield. Any demon willing to communicate, I don't want to see die."W@w.NOvel()orm.com

Acelina tilted her head to the side.

"And?"

"And what?"

"And... what is the reason?"

"That's it. That was the reason. You weren't a mindless, bloodthirsty monster, so I didn't want you to die."

Acelina's tail slipped up around her waist and flicked a few times until she gently wrapped its tip in her claws on her lap.

"You're injured."

He knew where this was going.

"Very. I am thoroughly fucked up. Every breath hurts. Sitting hurts."

"You need to eat."

"Yeap."

"My heart would have provided plenty of essence to a broken human.W@w.NOvel()orm.com

He shrugged. Which, of course, hurt.

"Probably, yeah. I bet it'd have filled me right up, and had leftovers for Jes."

"Then why not take it?" Her tail stopped swaying.

Sighing, he looked down and put a hand on his heart.

"A little while ago, Caera and I hunted down and killed a few humans. Before that, some humans jumped me, Jes, and Dao. Both times, it was clear the humans were full on willing to kill me, and the demons. No hesitation."

"Of course."

"Yeah, well, fuck that. I'm not going to be like that. I'm not like them, the Cainites that killed Caera's friends, or any of the souls that get sent down here to Hell. I'm not like that, and I refuse to become that. So, hey, if I come across a demon or human that's willing to talk and not fight, then I am happy to let them live." His fingers slid down his chest, dragged down, and his arms went limp on his lap. "So far, that's proving to be pretty rare. Everyone down here is ready and willing to kill each other at the drop of a hat, humans even more so than demons."

"It is Hell. Your naivety will get you killed."

"Better than becoming a monster."

"Most people disagree, the Cainians the most. They happily kill demon and soul alike, and if they could, angels as well."

"That's what Caera said. That the Cainites want to eat the hearts of angels."

Acelina nodded, and her tail, still on her lap and in her hands, resumed swaying lightly.

"They are but one of the many flavors of vileness you will find in the souls of Hell. And the demons that roam Hell are merely predators of such vileness."

He tilted his head. "Can't tell if you're saying I should be killing all demons on sight, or forgiving demons for being assholes because of circumstance."

"I... suppose I am saying both."

His head drifted back and rested against the stone as he looked up(W@w.NOvel()orm.com)

"My sister and I touched the gates of Heaven, you know."

Acelina froze. "Truly?"

"Yeah. We tried to cross. Didn't work. Felt like walking into a wall. All the angels freaked out, and before anyone knew what was going on, the Hell portal sucked us up and tossed us down here."

"You tell me much. Jeskura would not appreciate that."

"She's asleep." He checked her eyes, and checked them again. Still asleep, but he quietened down more, anyway. "And I guess I wanted the opportunity to... I don't know, talk about this with someone who isn't her, or Dao or Caera."

After a few moments of quiet and contemplation, Acelina gestured for him to continue.

"I landed in the red river near Gorzen Eye with my sister in my arms. We got separated. Some imps and grems found me, and were seconds away from ripping my heart out. They were everything I expected demons to me. Hungry and happy to kill." Slowly, he looked back to Jes, and watched her. "Dao and Jes showed up, killed them, and when they realized I didn't have a number, they were curious. Before I knew it, Dao had adopted me as a pet, and they were carting my ass across Hell."

"And, I guess my point is... my first day in Hell, I ran into demons that fit the stereotype, and I ran into demons that didn't. Jes and Dao are amazing, and Caera is, too. When I realized that, I also realized I didn't want to just assume every demon I came across was a horrible monster. You seem alright, relatively speaking. That Adron demon I saw seemed alright. Even that Vinicius guy seemed... well, I'm not entirely sure about Vinicius."

"You... are like a soul in the scrying pools," she said.

"So I hear. I mean, to me it's pretty normal for humans to not want to kill and eat each other."

"The souls in Hell came from the surface, first."

"Good point. I guess the really nasty sorts on the surface sorta just blend in, for the most part. Maybe they hide? Maybe I was just blind to them. I don't know. All I know is, on the surface, if I got into an accident, I could trust a stranger to help me." He shrugged. Ow. "Maybe that's just Canada, I dunno. I figure most places in the world are nice like that, on the whole."

"Truly naive."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I guess."

"Most demons will not be kind. If they see reason, or opportunity for a meal with no repercussions, they may take it. I would have."

"Well, hopefully, after this conversation, you--"

"Don't be ridiculous. I will not change. Demons respect the powerful, and that is how you control them. Anything else is a fool's hope."

Okay, Acelina wasn't on the same wavelength as Jes and the others, and not willing to change. Good to know. But she was honest about it, too. Maybe she had some things in common with Jes? But he didn't need his sister to tell him voicing that comparison would be a bad idea.

"You... saw the gates of Heaven?" she asked.

"Yeap. When Mia and I died, we spent almost seventeen days roaming around as ghosts, ignoring the gold light that kept appearing everywhere, beckoning us. Eventually we followed it, and we ended up on the stairs of Heaven."

"Tell me about it."

"You care about Heaven?"

"I am... curious. I have spent nearly every moment of my life in the spire, tending her eggs, and the hatchlings that emerge. Demons respect my might and vie for my approval. The world of metal, claw, blood, bone, and death is all I know. It is a world I enjoy, and that Zelandariel enjoyed. But that does not mean I have not wondered about the world above, the world the scrying pool cannot show me." Acelina enjoyed talking, once she was comfortable.

"The stairs were huge and long, and lined with thousands of angels. Around us were white clouds. The stairs took us above them, and overhead, stars and nebulae and galaxies shined." Hey look at him, talking smoothly. "Nine islands floated above, gold cities sitting on top of giant clouds."

He went on, describing Heaven in detail. If Acelina was enraptured, or just humoring him because he and Jes were her only chance of surviving, he couldn't tell. But she sat there, blank face betraying no expression, as she listened to him. And for some reason, he enjoyed talking to her, too.