

## 1303

--David--

Hell was an endless maze of mountains, or at least Death's Grip was. The name made sense in a weird way, as if the mountains had a grip on the land and kept it dead, barren, and lifeless. Did the other provinces even have foliage? All Death's Grip had were bloodgrip vines, the occasional black metal growth of a skull brazier, or maybe a statue, and some burning bushes, eternally covered in small, dancing flames.

It was beautiful, in a post-apocalyptic, oh-god-everything-sucks kinda way. They came across a tiny lava river, deep in a wide crack in the stone, and David spent a little time admiring how it flowed. It wasn't as hot as real lava, or his face would have burned off just peeking over the crack's edge with how close the flowing liquid was, but that only made it easier to admire.

Supposedly, the amber veins in the tunnels and caves, and occasionally on the ground and outer slopes of the mountains, were filled with the lava. And supposedly, a lot of demons thought maybe the lava was the blood of Hell herself, and that demons strong enough to breathe fire -- hellfire -- summoned that power. No way to prove any of it, and with how weird and wonky the rules of Hell were, probably the rules of all the afterlife, did it matter?

It mattered to him. It mattered to the weird runes floating around inside his mind. Hell was in the runes, swirling around another rune that represented the 'Great Tower', and the lava was in there, too. Liquid fire, heat, destruction, and power. And opposite of it: water, soothing coolness, creation, and... and... something. The opposite of power? Not weakness. Not submission.

He couldn't read the symbol completely, not the lava one or the water one, no matter how hard he tried.

"David," Jes said, "you've been staring at lava for five minutes."

He almost jumped. "Fuck, have I?"

"You have," Caera said. "Stuck in your head?"

"Y-Yeah. Just... yeah." He shook his head out, adjusted his half breastplate and straps, his leather skirt, and fell in behind Caera as they resumed the march. They were up in the mountains again, and following along routes where the mountains connected, like arms connecting at the hands. Which meant the lava had come up into the mountain. A volcano, waiting to explode? Not a big deal in the grand scheme of Hell.

Daoka clicked a few times as she hopped up beside David, and patted him on the shoulder.*w(w)w(n)ovel!WorM.com*

"He better be fine," Jes said. "How much longer, Caera?*w@w. @VèLvaRm.cóm*

"Last I met Renato, he was deep in these mountain tunnels. A couple days, maybe?"

The gargoyle hopped down from her boulder and landed beside the tiger lady.

"And you're sure we need to talk to him?"

"We don't need to, but he's a friend. A lot of the demons in this area listen to him."

"I've never run into him," Jes said.*www.NOvel!wOrM.Com*

"He stays deep in the mountain, deep enough the horde call can't reach him. He probably doesn't even know Zel's dead."

Acelina licked her shark teeth as she stepped ahead, and peeked out at the oncoming path. High as they were, they rarely had cover on both sides of them, and instead had to walk paths along mountainsides. At least that way, if the invisible monster attacked again, it might fall off again, and hopefully without triggering an avalanche. But the main reason was, it was just so damn easier to avoid getting ambushed, and maybe spot a potential meal from the vantage point. That was no excuse to do something stupid like get hypnotized by a lava river and forget they weren't hiding in a cave, though.

"I have heard of this Renato," Acelina said. "Zelandariel mentioned him, once. She did not like a tetrad in Death's Grip that did not obey her, but she also recognized there was little sense in having him killed, when he is too passive to challenge her."

Caera laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like Renato. We'll find him sitting around, doing absolutely nothing but getting his dick sucked by a succubus or two."

Dao chirped a few times, smiled deviously, and kissed David on the neck.

"I doubt David will agree to that," Caera said.

"Agree to...?"

"Suck tetrad dick," Jes said, licking her lips.

"Um. No." He frowned at Dao, earning some pouting and shoulder slumping from her, but he stood strong and dug his heels in. "Nope. Not happening."

"Shame," Jes said. "I bet that aura--"

All five of them snapped their heads up. Up? They were most of the way up a mountainside. The only things above them were the jagged tops of the mountains, and the fire sky. And movement, something that didn't match the swirling maelstrom and pouring flames. Three pairs of triangle-like shapes, white against the backdrop of the fire sky, and flapping in tandem.*w(w)novel!WorM.Co@*

Nostalgia hit him, and his heart caught in his throat. It was like seeing pigeons again, except white, like doves.

"Angels," he whispered.

Caera hissed. "Hide!"

"Hide where?" Acelina hissed back, crouching as best she could. "You chose the mountaintops! Now we are exposed!"

Dao clicked fast, grabbed David, and jumped.

The sensation of free falling wasn't entirely new, not since coming to Hell, but the sudden stops that came with hopping onto big boulders very much was. New and painful. Dao held him under her arm, and much as she was strong enough to hold him, her arm didn't make for the most comfy cushion. Each time her hooves met a boulder or rock outcropping on the way down the mountain wall, inertia hit him in the guts and he flopped around like a rag doll.

"Dao--" The wind rushed out of his lungs as another harsh landing drove Dao's arm up into his gut. He tried to lift his head, but the satyr was too fast, hopping down and down as fast as gravity let her. But between violent head bobs that threatened to break his neck, he spotted Caera pouncing down rocks beside them, and a pair of wings that glided past them, big black and red. Easy to forget that it wasn't only Jeskura who could glide, and the much bigger demon woman glided past them all.

David glanced up long enough to get eyes on the fire sky. The white wings above were getting closer.

The ground came at them too fast, and David clenched every muscle he had and then some as Dao's hooves met a large, flat section of the mountainside. With an exhausted squeak, Dao set him down, and he clutched his stomach as he looked around. They'd scaled down a huge chunk of the mountain in moments, and now Caera and Dao both panted, exhausted.

"This way!" Caera said. Panting or not, she dashed forward into a tunnel.

It was not a nice-looking tunnel. Bloodgrip grew around its edges, it wasn't very tall or wide, and even from the outside, there were visible, sharp rocks sitting inside it. The lack of amber veins made it dark. A dark, spooky tunnel, spookier than other tunnels in Hell. Not good not good.