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"Will you? 'Cause according to Jes, demons are terrified of zombies. Which, I mean, is kinda funny, since you deal with remnants all the time."

She nodded toward the tunnel path back the way they'd came.

"There's a big difference between a few remnants growing out of the ground, and a few hundred remnants grabbing and biting and pulling." She rubbed her tail against his stomach. "How are your wounds?"

He looked down at his body. Oh, right, he had a bunch of scratches and bite marks everywhere, some worse than Caera's.

"The joys of soft skin." He winced as he touched some of the torn skin on his wrist. And his calves. And his thighs. And his stomach. And, oh hey, his elbows, too. "Acelina spent a lot more time getting gnawed on than me."

"But she has demon skin." Caera pulled her tail off him, turned, and lay beside him, facing him. She set her big head on his lap, and closed her eyes. Oh god, it was like a literal Siberian tiger dinosaur monster covered in spikes with two horns had decided to take a nap on his lap.

Pet her?

Of course, pet her.

He set a hand on her head, and rubbed down hard against the top of her skull, where the black horns emerged from the dark red skin. Instant purrs from the tregeera.

"What do you think Greg is like?" she asked.

"No idea. If he's unmarked, he might be perfectly normal? But... probably not, if he's hanging out with Cainites."

"You said the portal to Hell scooped you off the stairs to Heaven, right?"

"Yeah."

"It bypassed the gates of Hell. You get your mark at the gates, where it tells you 'Abandon All Hope Ye Who Enter Here'. You go through that, and then the portal sucks you up. But if the portal is just... scooping you up from places it's not supposed to reach, it might have done the same thing to other unmarked."

"Which means someone can be a murdering asshole and not get marked." He sucked in a harsh breath between his teeth. "And considering his Cainite buddies, he probably is. And considering he's unmarked, he probably has auras and who knows what else going for him. And then there's the whole cracking Hell in half problem, and--"

"Don't worry about that. You just help me reach him, and I'll kill him quick." She lifted her head, licked him, and settled back on his lap. "I'm glad you came back."

"Came back?"*www.nóVΞltwδRm.©o©*

"Back out here."

"Well, I mean, I couldn't leave you--"

She kissed him again, rubbed her forehead against him, and kissed him some more. Kiss turned into deep kiss, and her purr turned into a quiet growl.

"I won't let anyone hurt you."

That sounded almost dangerously possessive. He shivered, and Caera grinned at him before settling her head on his lap again.

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~~Mia~~

It wasn't working.

"Nothing?" Yosepha asked.

"There's something, but it just isn't turning on! I can say it in my head, sign it, but when I do it latches a chain onto me, and I have to lift it. Potram is so light it pretty much floats, but batlam is killing me."

The angel smiled. "I admire your determination."

Mia tried to smile back, but it was hard, sweating and panting like she was. Who knew thinking about something could be so physically demanding.

"I... I need a break." She stumbled around in a circle for a few seconds before leaning against the cave wall. "I need some fucking carbs. And a whey shake."

"You're in the afterlife, Mia. You are essentially a ghost. You have no use for food."

"Disagree! Give me some caffeine, bananas, protein, and I'd blast through this workout." To prove her point, she flexed her arms, showing off her giant biceps. She did not have giant biceps, but still, she was fit and thin, and had the legs and butt to prove her history with the Olympic bar.

"That... is an idea."*wWw.n0veŁWo(·)m.côM*

"Eh?"*www.noVêLwoRM.côm*

"Perhaps this is less an issue with the difficulty of the rune, and more the fact you are a soul. Or at least, a soul of some form. Angels and demons store the resonance we consume, convert it into essence, and essence is used to fuel everything, every breath, every moment, every action. For demons, it becomes sin. For angels, it becomes grace."

"Sounds an awful lot like how human bodies use food."

"Indeed. But souls cannot do this. Like demons and angels, they store some essence in the body, but unlike us, they cannot tap into their inner resonance to create more, or acquire more by ingesting it. They burn very little essence unless they become injured, and even then, require only a fraction of the essence demons and angels require in order to heal and function."

Mia groaned. "Yeah. Hell wouldn't be all that torturous if souls died too easily."

Sighing, Yosepha patted her on the head with a wing.

"Regardless, perhaps the issue here is that, while using potram required very little of your essence to fuel and maintain, using batlam is simply a larger request than your body has essence to give."*©Ww.neVøWOm.c(◊)m*

"I... am getting pretty hungry."