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"I... see the memories of the people I'm eating. The bad stuff they did. If it's violent or mean, or... meant to harm someone, I suppose, I see it." She tapped her temple again. "It gets logged in here."

His eyes widened. "That's a very unusual trait."

"I know! And they're permanent memories, too. Thankfully, they don't really pop up in my thoughts unless I go digging for them, but they're there. It's so weird."

"Very." He stroked his chin and paced around. "I'll have to think about it. In the meantime, keep working on batlam, and keep--"

"Avoiding having an existential crisis?"

"Too late for that."

She groaned. "True."

"Keep exploring your abilities. The sooner we can determine your nature, the sooner we can figure out what to do."

"Who's we, exactly? The Damall? Or Heaven and the council?"

Frowning, he looked up at the rock ceiling, and his wings drooped.

"I don't know yet."

Oof.

~~~~~*ww.ÑovɛlwɔQm.çom*

~~David~~

That was a disturbing dream. Nothing quite like looking into your own eyes and seeing the grim, disturbing face of a young boy about to commit murder to really give you some PTSD. Just another stone on that pile.

Their group sat in an alcove some ways away from the temple, but not too far. They had no way to make a stretcher, and while Acelina had an easy time carrying the riiva, Daoka was too injured to risk so much as a bounce. Finding an alcove for her to rest had been agony, each step tense and horrible, and the Las didn't know the area well. But Caera remembered a few things about it, and found them an alcove they didn't have to climb or jump to get to.

Come the waning twilight, everyone got around Dao.

"Still breathing," Jeskura said, and she sighed relief. Every muscle in her body relaxed, and her tail wagged slowly as she lay beside her lover.

Dao smiled up at them, weakly clicked twice, and Jes motioned David in closer. He leaned in, and the satyr chirped once before she reached up, ran a claw down the side of his face, and gave him a kiss on the chin. Satisfied, she turned her face to nuzzle into Jes's side.

"She'll live," Caera said. The Las cheered with some high-pitched squeals and chirps.

"You're sure?" David asked.

"Yes. We'll have to be careful, but it's always the first night that matters for life or death." She leaned in and gave the satyr's shoulder a nuzzle, and Dao chirped back. "Thank you."

Jeskura frowned at Caera, but it faded quickly. Still angry at Caera, but Dao definitely wasn't, and all in all, their mission had been a success for more reasons than they'd even originally planned.

The sensation of a skull breaking under a rock ran through David's skin. The image of seeing it from the other end cut across his eyes. Sure, the plan had gone well for the demons, but for David, not so much.

Put in a box. Deal with it later.

"I had a dream," he said. "I saw Greg die, same as the other dream with the other unmarked."

"Makes sense," Caera said, "if you're seeing an unmarked's last moments."

"Sense?" Acelina said. "Any dream in Hell does not make sense. Dreaming is for the surface."

Everyone shrugged. At this point, they accepted that anything and everything involving David's quirks were a mystery they wouldn't be solving soon.

"What now?" Lasca asked, and she climbed over Caera's tail to get to David; it was a small alcove.

"Ask Caera, not me."

The tiger shook her head as she chuckled.

"You're the one who killed an unmarked and two angels, David. That's how demons pick who's the leader, usually, the one with the biggest trophies."

"That... makes no sense. I only got Greg because everything was chaos. And the angels..." Christ, he'd killed two angels. "I don't know how I did that. But that shouldn't matter anyway, not when you're the one with the most experience, Caera."

Acelina snorted, but nodded when everyone looked her way.

"The boy is endlessly irritating, but he has a head on his shoulders. Zelandariel would have agreed with his assessment."*ww.W.nɔvQw(ɔ)r-m.cOm*

Right on cue, Jes snapped her head up and glared at the spire mother, but one weak click from Dao was enough to settle her.©(w)w.N(ɔ)vɛlwQr-m.cOm

"I hated that bitch," Jes said, "but Acelina's right. Zel was smart, and she would have known to ignore the whole trophy obsession. Caera knows more about the other provinces than we do."

"I have been around a lot of Hell," Caera said. "All the way to Angel's spine, and I've been to the Grave Valley. Each province handles differently. Here in Death's Grip, it's always been just... groups of demons doing their own thing. Tribes. They fight each other, but if they piss off a bailiff, the bailiff brings them in line. Three bailiffs keep the province strong and ready to fight off invaders." Sighing, she brought a hand up to her face, touched her ruined eye, and hissed. "The Grave Valley is more like... a structured version of Death's Grip. The groups there are more organized. They have names, and they fight each other regularly."

"That's not bad for keeping their numbers up?" David asked.

"Azailia and Zel are... were cooperative," Acelina said. "They had a truce. They would never attack each other's borders."

"I thought the Grave Valley bordered on another province, the Scar. Azailia's not worried about them?"

"Nah," Caera said. "The Scar is mostly concerned with its own shit, and the other provinces leave them alone because they like the silk they make."

"Everyone loves fashion," Acelina said, chuckling.

There was no way the Scar maintained peace with its neighbors purely on exporting fashion, and Caera and Acelina knew it, too. The Scar had a secret, but apparently not one they felt like telling David. Not important, then? He could find out later.

"Alright, plan time," David said, and he rubbed his hands together before sitting back against the alcove wall. Plans were fun. Executing them wasn't, but he loved making them. "We're done here, but if my gambit with that angel doesn't pay off, we can't stay here for long. Any idea how long it'll take the angel to get reinforcements?"

"It takes a few days of flying to reach the vortex from here," Caera said. "I mean, so I've read. There're a few old stories about battles with angels. I pieced it together, so I could be wrong. But I think a few days is a safe guess. Double that for the return trip."

"Then I guess we're lucky we started on the wrong side of Hell, if False Gate is our goal. Are we even sure we need to get to False Gate to cross the inner sea?"

Caera nodded as she prowled over to him, and lay down perpendicular to him, side to the wall, and huge head on his lap. She hid her bad eye in toward him, but made sure she didn't put any weight on it.

"Far as what I've read," she said, "Lucifer and the Old Ones went back and forth between False Gate and the Forgotten Place a lot."

"He, er, they didn't just, teleport everyone? That something archangels can do?"

"No idea," Caera said. "I hope not, or we're fucked."*(w)ww.(n)OvêłW.Rm.cóm*

The amount of uncertainties in their journey was triggering, and he ground his teeth until his jaw clicked.

"Then I guess we wait until we can move Dao more easily, and then we get going to... the Grave Valley?"

"Indeed," Acelina said, "if we can get past Domicela and the Geeraz Tombs."

"We're already mostly around it," Caera said. "We're a week out from the Grave Valley border, and Domicela will be concerned with trying to get across the canyon to the spire, especially if she's learned Zel is dead. No need to worry about her."

The spire mother nodded, growling quietly as she aimed her eyeless gaze down. David did his best to not look at Jeskura. He still hadn't told Caera or Dao that Mía was the one who killed Zel, not the rider, and far as he knew, Jes hadn't told them yet, either. And now with the Las around all the time, telling them without Acelina finding out would be nearly impossible. Honestly, the less that knew, the better, so Acelina would never accidentally find out. A white lie that made sure everyone got along.