

~~Author's Note~~

Welcome. "A Taste of Hell" is a mini series of small novelettes, each told from a unique point of view of side characters in my upcoming main series "The Pleasures of Hell", a fantasy adventure set in Hell. While the main series will have two PoVs, both human (brother and sister) and not featured in this series, these prologue/bonus chapters will give curious readers a taste of this setting from the view of the various angels and demons that populate it, and a taste of the erotic elements.

These chapters are entirely optional. No need to read them if you'd prefer to go into the main series blind.

Erotically, "A Taste of Hell", and "The Pleasures of Hell", will focus largely on monster girls and monster boys, usually paired with someone not monster-y. Expect lots of kinks to be explored, with exaggerated proportions, size difference, deep/large penetration, harems and/or reverse harems, and plenty of others. There'll be fantasies for dominant and submissive readers alike. Erotic scenes that are particularly long and descriptive will be bracketed with ♥♥♥♥/♥♥♥♥ . If you're not looking for a juicy scene, skim the dialog in these sections so you don't miss anything important.

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This chapter is heavy on setting exploration. If you'd prefer to not get spoiled about setting details, no need to read, or read this after having read a decent chunk of the main series. I'll make sure to avoid spoiling anything major in these novelettes, but I know some readers prefer going into a series as a blank slate.

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~~Three years before the Arrival~~

~~Janneke~~

She pulled against the cuffs around her wrists, but they held true. If it'd been a pair of meera cuffs, then maybe she could have broken free of them with great use of her grace. But they were aera. Humans called it Hell bronze. Angels called it frustratingly durable.

Her eyes followed the cuffs to the chain between them, and demon that held it. A devorjin, a large, hornless, tailless brute. Janneke was a mikalim, and more than capable of wrestling down most demons and killing them with her bare hands. But not a devorjin. The hulking creature held her chain and cuffs meant to bind the most powerful demons unlucky enough to be caught in them, and she could not so much as even attempt to wrestle herself free with her grace drained.

The cuffs were meant for wrists of her size, and no demon who could fit into cuffs this size would be strong enough to break meera with pure brute strength, let alone the far stronger aera metal. Which meant the cuffs were made to hold unusually dangerous demons of her size, or angels. Zelandariel had to trade — or fight or steal — to get aera metal, and it was likely she took it from False Gate. Quite the hassle, for such a specific purpose.

Zel was going to eat her.

Janneke glared at the back of the eight-foot beast before her, and reached into her self. Her grace was nothing more than quiet embers. She could not summon her batlam rune, so she had no armaments, and no armor. That left her in her white silk robes, bracelets and necklaces of gold, gold-colored sandals, and her face exposed. Vulnerable.

The creature took her through one of the many tunnels beneath the mountains of Death's Grip. They'd been walking for two days, and had two days more before they reached the spire, and Zelandariel. Two days of hoping the devorjin would let his guard down. Two days of no such mistake. But two more days of hope, and attempts to escape.

The devorjin did not speak, even when she goaded and insulted him. So convinced of his loyalty to Zel, he would not even tell the angel his name. So devoted was he, he did not relieve his sexual hungers upon her. He'd been tempted, several times, and had once approached her with rage in his dark eyes deep within his skull-like face, enormous shaft dangling between his thighs, but had stopped himself. Lucky for him. Her hands were bound and held to a chain, but her feet were perfectly free, and she'd have been quite ready to remind the demon why it was better to keep his skin dark and hard, and his sensitive parts inside and safe.

It never came to it. Instead, whoever this devorjin was, he took her down into the canyons of Death's Grip, deep between the sharp rocks, deep between the jagged cliffs, and deep into the bowels of Hell. The rock down here was hotter, and amber veins decorated many rock faces, some of them large

enough they radiated with the heat of hellfire. Much of the rock showed obvious signs of melting, with dripping stalactites from curved rock walls threatening to fall on them in the canyon. The skies above, burning with flames of red, orange, and blood, darkened as night fell on them. But night mattered little in Hell when fire burned everywhere.

Janneke snarled as she looked around at the tightening walls. Impins and impas, gremlins and gremlas, they perched on the myriad of rock outcroppings in the small canyon, staring at her. Several of the short creatures openly masturbated, stroking their penises or penetrating themselves with their tails — claws were an issue — as they smiled at her, showing their many teeth.

It only grew worse as they continued, and the canyon's walls merged into a ceiling before the canyon, now tunnel, spread wider. A cave that morphed into a tunnel, with stalagmites and stalactites its teeth. The heat increased, humidity drowning her, but at least there was space to move.

More grems and imps. Janneke growled at one of the nearby infernal creatures, an impa, and she chuckled maniacally as she licked her lips. But the impa knew to not touch her. It was Janneke's only saving grace, that the imps and grems knew this devorjin and knew who he served. Or they knew the devorjin would happily kill and eat a dozen of them before they managed to steal Janneke away.

And they definitely wanted to. An angel would be quite the prize for any demon, hence the devorjin's steel resolve in her capture, but many demons would have taken the opportunity to indulge in her beauty. Her radiant wings of white, her warm skin and dark lips, and long platinum blond hair drew the eyes of all the demons she past. Her white marble eyes glared death at any demon foolhardy enough to meet her gaze, but she was bound, and the demons lauded the opportunity to watch her with hungry interest. Not even her — according to her gabriem friends — 'naturally angry face', dissuaded the gawking creatures.

They went deeper. Noises echoed in the tunnel, chirping sounds, mixed with high pitched moans. Some burning bushes lit alcoves along the walls, amber veins flickering in the reflected firelight, and the swirling red danced along the cave stone as constructs of dark meera metal played with the light.

Statues. Statues of demons of old, and demons of now. Dozens of them, maybe even hundreds. She didn't know when they were forged or who forged them. Perhaps Valzanal, ruler of Death's Grip before Zelandariel. She'd been one of those theatrical ruler types, as far as Jann knew, with a habit of indulging in displays of violence, torture, and anything that inflated her ego.

Or Hell could have forged the statues herself. It wouldn't have been the first time.

Many of the statues were sitting, backs to the walls of the tunnel, or backs to each other. Most had their arms out of the way of their bodies, with legs out to create a lap of some kind. And most of them had enormous, erect penises.

Metal likely did not make for comfortable penetration, but that didn't stop half the statues from having one demon or another in their laps. Mostly demons of female tilt, but a few male types enjoyed some giant metal phalluses in their bodies as well. A strange orgy of casual reverence in the demons of old, demons like the tetrad, or even some of the great children like Belor or Camilla. Camilla was of female tilt, according to the records, but that didn't stop the statue from having a very large penis. Artistic license, or Hell giving the demons what they wanted, Jann didn't know. But swarms of the annoying imps and grems, and several succubi and incubi draped themselves over the titan woman of dark metal.

The children of the old ones were enormous, and the status reflected that, dwarfing her captor, and even the tetrad demon statues nearby. Jann had only ever seen Belor in person, and it was not an experience she longed to relive.

Her captor dragged her along, and she followed, distracted. Some of the demons were covered in blood, either blood of other demons they'd fought, or the damned. Likely the damned, considering several humans screamed in agony as their chests were torn open, hearts ripped out, and bodies strewn over the statues. Stone, metal, and blood. That was Death's Grip.

Jann winced and looked away as a young man screamed. A tregeera had mounted the man, used her sin to dominate his mind, and was forcing his body to arousal. She was raping him. And then she would eat him.

Janneke closed her mind to it as best she could. They were damned for a reason, and no matter how much she wanted to save them, she couldn't, demons or no demons.

She closed her eyes and covered her ears as they walked past the orgy and feast. A few shrieks managed to pierce her hands, and she ground her teeth as she pulled her wings closer around her. It was stupid to close her eyes. She needed to look for an opportunity to escape, and she couldn't do that blinding herself. And worse, one of the damn creatures might jump her, and her devorjin captor might be a little slow saving her.

She needed resonance. Somehow, she needed to get resonance, or she'd be trapped until her fellow angels found her. Considering she was deep in a cave tunnel in the center of Death's Grip, it was highly unlikely any of her brothers or sisters would find her. Without the waters of Heaven, her options were limited. No human of Hell would willingly part with their resonance, leaving her with few options.

She glared at the devorjin still pulling her chains. No, she would never be able to defeat a brute like him with her grace depleted. Even with her grace, a devorjin was a threat to any mikalem, and killing one was difficult. Killing one, and a hundred imps, grems, a handful of succubi and incubi, and several tregeeras and vratorins, would be impossible. She had to sneak away, not fight off a horde.

The tunnel only grew worse as they continued along. The perpetual orgy and feast faded, but never truly died. Even as the strange statues ceased to be, disappearing behind her as they followed twists and turns, still she occasionally spotted a demon or two enjoying their meals. Human hearts. The corpses were everywhere, many ripped in half, with limbs draped over stalagmites, guts strewn about. Blood flowed, dripping down over stone to the cave floor where Janneke walked, until her sandals made a small splash with each step. Many of the demons were covered in the blood of their kills, a few of the more aggressive ones eating the hearts of their kin rather than humans, but the result was the same. Corpses, everywhere.

A couple humans screamed as they were killed, some of them slowly by the more abhorrent demons. There was no reason for demons to torture or rape their prey before killing them. And yet, many did. Foul beasts. Abominations. If her grace had not been drained, she would have summoned her batlam rune out of sheer disgust, and killed as many demons as she could before the inevitable.

No. That wasn't true. There was no helping the damned, and she knew it. Sacrificing herself to save them would be pointless. This was how it had been for thousands upon thousands of years, and her succumbing to rage and dying in a useless kamikaze would do nothing to change that. And as much as it sickened her, the Great Gate sent these souls to Hell for a reason. She was not witnessing the kind, giving, loving souls of Heaven be butchered. These souls were the rotting, twisted souls of Hell suffering their due punishment. God's decree.

God was an asshole.

As if the Creator heard her thoughts and wanted to punish her for insubordination, the tunnel only grew worse. The blood under her sandaled feet grew higher and higher, until each step reached her knee. Soon it reached her hips. Eventually it reached her chest, and every step became a chore. It wasn't red water, like the rivers of Hell, tainted with blood but still water. It was actual blood, fresh, thick, smelling of flesh and surface metals, and soaking through her white silks and coating the gold jewelry of her potram rune's clothes.

The screams of dying humans were soon replaced with the screams of dying remnants. She braced herself for misery, but there was no growing accustomed to seeing remnants. Humans in agony, growing out of the walls, flesh mangled and broken by stone. Many of them were trapped between slabs

of rock, skin perpetually split, sawed by rubbing against their prison. Some struggled under the surface of the blood river, near drowning, gargling the crimson liquid as they fought for every breath.

456. 142. 227. 541! How long would these poor souls suffer for their misdeeds?

A gremla perched upon one of the writhing remnants high above, and she tore the remnant open through the back, the only vantage point she could get from up there. The remnant screamed, begging for mercy, mangled words spoken from a destroyed mind. The gremla didn't care, or at least showed no signs of caring. She ripped the remnant open, ripped out the heart, and ate it, silencing the woman. What little resonance was found in the heart of a remnant would be nothing more than a trace of what was once in the human before, but the gremla devoured it regardless, and the now dead remnant fell apart, limbs and skin and organs plummeting into the river of blood below. The blood splashed, and much of it fell over Janneke's head, coating her hair and face in the vile liquid.

The gremla above burst into chattering laughter, before she glided to the side of the cave, perched upon another groaning, begging remnant, and resumed her scavenging. The new remnant's cries doubled.

Soon the blood river's depth grew so high, its surface reached Janneke's neck. She was quite tall, but if the river grew any deeper, she would drown, same as any human or demon.

"Devorjin," she said. The beast turned his thick skull to look at her with his black eyes. "If this keeps up, I'll drown."

"Fly."

"I am not a humming bird!"

"Humming bird?"

She rolled her eyes. Demons had their own scrying pools. Surely he knew of creatures from the surface?

"I can't hover in place for long, and flying in place is difficult." Despite herself, she snickered. "Not that a demon would know what flying was like."

Predictably, the gremla near her, now eating the second remnant's heart, half squawked half roared at her, and fluttered her tiny wings. Envious, the creature was. But unfortunately for Janneke, she could do little to stop the gremla from throwing the limb of her remnant kill at her. She blocked the oncoming gore with a wing, but it mattered little. She was coated head to toe in blood, and that included her once white wings.

“Then swim.”

“You bound my hands!”

The devorjin shrugged. “With your legs.”

“I can’t swim with just my legs! My wings do not allow it! I…” Her voice trailed off as she looked down the tunnel, over the river of blood, past the amber veins on the walls that lit the tunnel, and into the darkness beyond. Something was moving.

“Glor,” the voice called out, deep, guttural.

Janneke’s captor rumbled in his chest, a powerful vibration that bubbled the blood around him like a bellowing alligator from the surface.

“Merric.”

Merric, evidently, approached, blood splashing about his chest. Another devorjin. Heavy as he was, a huge monster of muscle and power, the blood had little choice but to break apart around him, doing nothing to slow him.

“Give me the angel, Glor.”

So her captor’s name was Glor, then.

Glor snarled, hints of rasp hidden by the booming depth of the creature’s growl. “She is for Zel.”

“Zel does not need her.” Merric came closer, posturing, puffing up his chest. It was a massive chest, the devorjin being nearly nine feet tall, with shoulders wide enough to give any angel pause. He was bigger than Glor, slightly.

“I will let Zel be the judge of that.”

“Glor. I want that angel.”

Glor glanced back and up at the only other demon that remained nearby, the gremla. A thousand remnants dangled from above, moaning, groaning, bleeding, but without a proper perch for bottom feeders like grems and imps to feast upon. This gremla, on the other hand, had followed Glor quite a ways regardless, using the writhing remnants themselves as perches. Resourceful.

Glor snarled. “Zel will learn of this. She—”

Giggling, the gremla glided from her perch, and landed on Merric’s shoulder.

Glor rumbled, angry, preparing for battle, and stepped back. Oh. Merric had recruited this gremla then, and had her following them. Intelligent plan, for a devorjin.

“If you give me the angel, you live,” Merric said. “We won’t speak of it, ever. Zel will kill me for taking her prize. She’ll kill you, for letting me take it.”

Glor looked back at Janneke. For a moment, she thought maybe the creature would release her, or maybe ask for her help. But after a few more seconds, and a few more growls, he looked back to Merric and the gremla perched on his enormous shoulder.

“No.”

Merric sighed and shook his head, dark eyes looking frustrated, but soon widened with hunger. “Tanita and I will feast on the two of you, then.”

Merric took one step forward, as did Glor, Janneke’s chain still in his hand. They were going to fight. How in God’s name did this devorjin think he could take on another devorjin, with a gremla to help him, and hold Janneke prisoner at the same time?

She braced for the inevitable battle, and the fact Glor still held her chain and was likely to drag her through the blood river in the fight. If ever there’d be an opportunity to escape, this would be it. But where would she go? If she could free her chain of Glor’s grip, she could fly, and return the way she came. No. Without her grace, she would be overtaken by the demons behind her. Go forward then? The blood river would be difficult to fly over, with how little space it left her between the liquid, and the screaming, clawing remnants above. Maybe—

Everyone stopped when the blood behind Merric stirred. The two growling devorjin went silent, and even the gremla shut up as she looked behind her down at the thick, crimson liquid. Everywhere else, the blood river was deathly still, more like a lake in the shape of a river, with the liquid unflowing. The surface was undisturbed everywhere, save for the small waves behind Merric.

Blood exploded outward, a geyser of absurd proportions that shot up and out from behind Merric, and it buried everyone in red. Jann threw up her hands to try and cover her face, but it was pointless. The waves crashed down on her, and she fell back, only managing to not fall and sink because her wings stabilized her against the blood behind her. But she still stumbled back, what little bit of her that stuck out from the blood river now also coated in thick layers of blood as the waves turned everything into chaos.

There was something in the blood.

It jumped out at Merric from behind him, and before Merric could so much as finish turning around, one of the newcomer’s enormous arms shot out for him. No, not him. The gremla Tanita. She managed a tiny squawk of surprise before a titanic hand encompassed her head, and half of her torso in



its grip. And squeezed. Bones cracked, flesh tore, and the small creature's head and upper torso imploded in a single second.

Merric managed to come to his senses and jump back away from the monster. Two gigantic wings spread out from beneath the red, sending blood splattering everywhere as the gargantuan demon threw the gremla corpse to the side hard enough she crashed into the wall. The blood tunnel echoed with the sounds of more snapping bones.

Jann stared up at the demon, gulped, and took several more steps back until the chain in Glor's hand went taught. Oh Lord, that was a tetrad demon. That was a gorujin.

The ten-foot-tall demon threw himself at Merric. No conversation, no warning growls, no challenges, nothing. Whoever this beast was, he meant business, and he sank gigantic claws into Merric's shoulders as the devorjin fought back. The impact of their weights colliding was enough to have the blood river churning into rapids.

Glor threw himself at the gorujin as well. He might as well have been fighting a mountain. The titan was bigger than them, with a towering body of epic proportions. He was just as muscular as the devorjin, but easily twice as heavy considering how much taller he was. Four colossal horns raised high and coiled back over his head. Two colossal wings spread out, dwarfing Jann's, black leathery things with claws on each finger. His tail whipped about in the blood, stirring up a frenzy and bubbling mess, creating only more chaos as the titan ripped into Merric.

Glor, one hand still holding Jann's chain, crashed into the titan's side hard enough to force him back several feet. The tetrad demon got one hand around Merric's throat for balance, and as Merric tore at him, fighting to penetrate the layers of dark metal strapped to the invader's arm, the newcomer ripped open Merric's throat. His power was absurd, having done far more than simply cut Merric's throat. He'd ripped the front half of Merric's throat off.

But he was stumbling back from Glor's attack. Even as Merric clutched at his throat futilely, stumbling back as well before falling into the river, waves of his blood pouring out from between his fingers, it looked like Glor had created an opening on the gorujin. He threw himself onto the stumbling giant, dragging Jann closer to the mayhem as he took advantage of the gorujin's blunder.

The gorujin reached back, as if he were about to fall into the blood backward from Glor's tackle. But he didn't. His hand found something solid well before he fell back. And before Glor realized it, the gorujin's wings snapped out, bracing him in the blood, as the gorujin's hand pulled something out from under the blood river.

A giant sword, an ugly slab of metal that must have seen a hundred battles without ever being repaired — if such a hunk of metal could ever truly need repair — crashed down on Glor's head. Onto, and through, splitting the large demon's head in half before cutting down deeper, propelled by sheer mass and momentum, to cut down through Glor's throat, and into his chest.

Glor fell to his knees, his chin... chins now skirting the surface of the blood river. He didn't fall over, not with the titan's sword lodged in his chest. Everything went silent.

Jann stared up at the giant beast as he chuckled, reached for Glor with his free hand, reached down into the blood, and ripped the demon's heart free. With another chuckle, he yanked his sword free of the devorjin, let Glor's corpse disappear into the blood, and bit into his prize. Some of the blood within the heart squirted out from the monster's mouth and into the endless red around them, but the flesh quickly disappeared behind the creature's sharp teeth.

The gorujin nodded to Jann, a satisfying smirk on his demon face, as he set his sword behind his back between his wings. He'd attached it to something between his shoulder blades.

Whoever this gorujin was, he was smart, to feint a stumble, only to withdraw a blade he'd hidden in the blood ahead of time.

"I see I'm not too late," the beast said, voice deep, rumbling. Almost pleasant, and mostly terrifying.

"T... Too late?" A gorujin. One of the tetrad. She was looking at, and standing only ten feet away, from one of the demons of the old world.

For all her centuries of training, and even several encounters with demons, she knew she was afraid. Blood pumped through her, readying her for a battle she could not hope to win.

"I heard an angel had been captured, and was being carted to Zel. To get eaten, probably. Bitch really has high expectations, to actually have demons out hunting angels. I bet Zel's just dying to get her hands on one." The demon licked some of his fangs, and smiled at her.

Gorujin faces were, as the humans said, 'demon' faces. Skull-like, with flat noses that were almost non-existent, and defined eyebrow ridges that reminded onlookers of skulls. Alien and terrifying a face as it was, like many demons, it did have a strange attractiveness to it, a defined jaw that seemed strangely masculine, with deep black eyes with red irises.

Many demons were oddly attractive. The carnage and blood lust offset that.

"I... see."

Shrugging, the titan reached down into the blood, down, and down until his torso and face half submerged into it. He came back up with her chain in hand. She almost screamed in rage, but the painful truth quickly squashed the rising fury. Even if she had ran in that split moment Glor's corpse had let go of her chain, this titan would have ran her down. That, or the hundred demons in the path behind her would have found her, raped her, and eaten her. And perhaps not in that order.

With another playful, deep chuckle, the titan licked some of the chunks of heart stuck in his teeth free, before he reached down for Merric's corpse. One hand still held her chain, while the other tore at the corpse beneath the surface of the river, again hiding the tetrad demon's face as he dipped below the surface. But soon he came back up, another demon heart in hand.

"I'm Romakus."

"... Janneke." Well, this was a first. A demon polite enough to introduce himself, unprompted.

He nodded, gently pulled on her chain, and walked toward the corpse of the gremla with her in tow. With a flick of the hand, he wrapped her chain around his enormous wrist, freeing his hand for use, and used both to surgically remove the gremla's tiny heart with his claws.

"Hello Janneke. I suppose you think I'm here to rape and eat you, like Merric was."

She shivered with the vulgar imagery.

"Disgusting. Abhorrent. Vile—"

"Agreed. Horrible behavior."

"I—what?"

"Agreed. Never understood demons who feel the need to torture their meals." Shrugging, Romakus started back into the river of blood, the way he came from. "And I'm not going to eat you, either."

"You're not?"

"No. But you are coming with me for a bit. Come on."

"Why? So you can feed me to—"

"I'm not going to feed you to anyone, either. Come on." He gave her chain a tug.

She almost argued. He wasn't going to kill or, or get her killed. But, also wasn't going to let her go? What then? She would not be his slave! She was no betrayer.

For the moment at least, it meant she had more time to look for an escape. And yet, while escaping from a devorjin brute would have been near impossible without being able to use her grace, escaping from a gorujin? One of the terrible four? Her chances had fallen from slim to none.

“How did you sneak up on them? How did you breathe?”

He grinned back to her, titanic horns turning like some sort of majestic, imposing crown. “I held my breath.”

This beast was difficult to read. He smiled constantly, playful, evil grins, and he tugged on her chain every so often just to see her stumble. But like him, her wings were vast, and more than capable of keeping her from falling, especially with them catching waves of blood instead of air. Unlike him, her wings were half submerged, and moving forward was difficult.

“Slow down. I’m... I’m exhausted.”

“Yeah, thought so. How’d you drain your grace?”

“That is none of your—” He gave her chain another hard yank, this time almost sending her forward into the blood river, despite her wings bracing her. “Alright! I was scouting. I got too close to a mountain.”

“Death’s Grip is full of mountains. How stupid are you?”

She snarled and yanked on her chain, but the beast didn’t so much as budge.

“I am not stupid, gorujin. Some demons were expecting me.”

“Ah. I doubt they were expecting you specifically. Just that there’s been a few angel sightings lately, and they were hoping there’d be more.”

“And risk another confrontation? Just for the chance at a meal?”

He laughed and gave his giant wings a small shake. His long tail slithered behind him under the blood, occasionally brushing up against her leg, despite her attempts to avoid it.

“Heaven is weak, angel.”

“That is not true.”

“And yet you angels never make your presence known.”

“We have no reason to.”

“Uh huh.” He laughed again. Considering how often he laughed, and how merry a laugh it was, she almost suspected the gorujin was secretly a gremlin or impin. Maniacal, absurd creatures. But no, he truly was one of the terrible four, and he guided her down the blood river with a purpose.

“Here,” he said, ten minutes later.

“Here?”

“Yep.” He looked up. The cave roof twenty feet up was covered in remnants, pleading, crying, screaming, many of them tearing at each other as they struggled to pull their bodies free of the rock. It was pointless. Most remnants had no legs. Some had no arms. All of them pried at their tomb as if they could free themselves from the Hell that bound them.

“I don’t understand. What—”

Romakus crouched low, and jumped. Blood erupted from where he stood, and she tried to jump back, but the chain was only twenty feet long. She was pulled into the wave of blood, and she sputtered as the vile liquid hit her mouth. For a moment she pulled desperately at the chain, afraid to get crushed by Romakus as he came down from his leap, but he didn’t.

She looked up, and stared as the demon climbed through the remnants, into a hole in the ceiling of the cave. It’d been hidden, completely covered by dozens of remnants that grew in the cracks of the stone, along the slabs of rock of the sharp opening. The only way anyone could have seen the hole would have been to both remove a couple dozen remnants, and somehow latch onto the cave ceiling, making it a near impossible hole to discover, and again clear for use. Romakus had, and did. With chain still wrapped around his wrist, he sank his left hand’s claws into stone, actually piercing the rock, and he raked through the remnants with his other.

Jann covered her head as limbs, organs, and blood fell upon her. Romakus didn’t so much as hesitate to end the lives of three or four remnants with each and every swing of his right hand’s claws. A head plopped into the blood in front of Jann, floated to the surface, and the number changed from 312 to 311. And like an idiot, she looked into the remnant’s eyes, the human’s eyes, before the head floated away.

She wanted to weep. Never had she been in such dire circumstances, trapped deep in the stones of Hell, grace drained, and nothing but death and gore about her. But it wasn’t her circumstances that had her struggling to hold back tears. It was the cries of the remnants. Blistered souls, weeping endlessly, many struggling to form words as what remained of their minds slurred and gargled. Years, decades, maybe centuries of agony for some of the more unfortunate, twisted souls. And why? Because those

souls deserved to be damned? Could there not be a better way? Body parts were everywhere now, floating in the blood river, and she forced down a disgusted groan as she wiped some organ off her shoulders. A flutter of her wings against the air and blood dislodged what she could only imagine were intestines hooked over her feathers. Hell, was repugnant.

She almost didn't realize it when Romakus disappeared into the hole above, his way cleared. A hard yank on her chains quickly reminded her to look up, and she ground her teeth as Romakus pulled her up. Soon she left the still river below, and had to tuck her wings close to her body as Romakus pulled her into the hole in the cave's ceiling. Blood coated the stone, but at least no remnants reached out for her. She didn't know what she'd do if one of those things got its hands on her.

She tried to climb the stone, but it was flat, a sheer rock face with nothing for her fingers or sandals to find. But Romakus climbed without issue, each swing of his arms sinking his claws into the stone with a loud crunch and crack. As he pulled her up and up, she stared at the holes his claws left, lit by amber veins. Tetrad demons were rare, with how many died in the Spires War, and Belor's last stand. Janneke herself had never met one until now, and with every passing moment, she knew that even if her grace had been full to bursting, she would not have been able to defeat this creature in combat, not alone.

And yet, for some strange reason, he didn't plan to kill her, or indulge himself with her. Or he was lying and toying with her. If that were so, he was a true master of torture.

Eventually Romakus pulled her up into what looked like a large room, perhaps fifty feet across. A burning bush sat within a corner, and amber veins lit the room well enough, pointing to another path above, another hole. Thank the Lord, the alcove was devoid of remnants, and the cries and screams of the other thousands of remnants nearby were dulled by the stone.

Romakus sat upon a boulder, and grinned at her as he slowly pulled on her chain, bringing her ever closer to the beast.

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Release me."

"Ha! Yeah, I could do that." He licked a fang as he continued to pull her, until she was only a single foot from the titan's teeth. With him sitting, her standing, they were face to face. "But you won't survive. You're deep below Death's Grip, and many demons saw you being taken. Anyone who sees you is going to run you down, looking for a taste, or Zel's favor."

She sighed as she looked down. He was right. She couldn't defend herself from the myriad of demons swarming through the stone depths of Death's Grip.

"Then you must help me."

He laughed with disturbing merriment. "Why would I do that?"

"Why did you save me from those devorjins?"

"Maybe I just don't like Zel."

"You said you weren't going to eat me, or feed me to anyone."

"Yeap."

"Then what is your intention?" She flared her wings and flapped them toward him, pushing her back as they splattered blood outward. But the demon's grip on the chain was absolute, and she went nowhere. "I will not be... some slave to a demon. I will not do your bidding."

Romakus grinned. "You talk big for an angel with an exhausted grace and chains around her wrists." He tugged on the chain again, and how it bound her hands together.

"I would rather die."

With a chuckling sigh, Romakus set both hands onto the cuffs binding her wrists. "Don't move."

"I—" She sucked in a quick breath as the beast curled his fingers into the bonds of the chain, and pulled apart. If he pulled unevenly, he could have snapped her wrists, broken them, or ripped her hands off. But Romakus was precise, a rare quality in a demon, and he snapped the cuff apart that bound her right wrist. And then her left. His strength was unreal, to break area. Only in the council would she expect to find angels of similar strength, or angels of old.

"Now you owe me two." He held up two of his long fingers.

"I... I owe you." God forgive her, she hadn't even considered that. "Assuming you aren't lying to me."

He placed a hand onto his chest, where a slab of dark metal had been hammered into the shape of one of his pectorals, and held in place by leather straps. "Swear to God."

She eyed him, and he laughed. This titan was less a monolith of power, and more a trickster.

"Then what do you intend to do with me, gorujin?"

"Not entirely sure yet. Play with you a little, probably." His smile danced between trickster, and vile serpent. "And then I'll help you get out of here."

“Play with me? I will not... pleasure you, demon.” She stepped back, aided by a flap of her wings, the single motion putting ten feet between her and the titan as she landed gracefully. Sighing, she rubbed her wrists, before looking back to Romakus, still sitting on his boulder. Considering the demon had saved her life, it did make sense for the beast to request a favor from her, but not that.

“You make it sound like I’d be a terrible lover.”

She ran her hands down her body, her soaked silk garments, and over her wings, doing her best to rid herself of the copious blood. It stained her clothes red, and soaked into her feathers. No angel in the history of creation will ever rejoice as she would, once she was back in Heaven and under its flowing waters again.

“Lover? Don’t abuse the word.”

“Ha. Really think I’d be horrible?”

“What would a demon such as you know about pleasuring an angel?”

Romakus shrugged. “Yosepha seems to love my dick, I’ll have you know.”

“I... you... you know Yosepha.”

Again, the titan’s smile became a twisted, playful thing. “Intimately.”

“You lie.”

“Ha, do I? Kinda short for an angel, dark skin, very short curly hair. Emerald eyes. Lot of gold tattoos, too, in some very sexy places I might add.”

Janneke stood there, staring at the titan. Surely he was lying.

“I don’t believe you. You... You must have seen her once.”

“Then how do I know she has a gold tattoo right here?” He pointed at his sternum. “Another here.” He pointed at his abdomen, where several thick straps of goort leather crossed.

“I... don’t know.”

He licked his fangs and leaned toward her, still sitting on his boulder. “You have no idea how good it feels, inside that angel’s ass. It’s a pretty big, tight, firm ass for a small angel like her, you know? And listening to her mewl, feeling her squeeze on me as she soaks my—”

“Enough! Enough.” Jann turned and raised a wing, using it to block her view of Romakus as she digested that image. “Fine, I believe you. Yosepha has been... hiding something from me, I knew that. I thought she’d found a lover among the souls of Heaven.”



“I doubt any human dick gonna satisfy that ass.”

Crass! This damned creature was beyond rude, and vulgar. A philistine.

“I—”

“It’s this long, you know.”

Stupidly, she raised her wing from blocking her view of him, curious what he meant. He held out both hands in front of him, indicating some length well over a foot long. It took a moment, but she realized he meant the length of his penis. She quickly put her wing back in place, blocking her view of him once again as she scowled.

“What could Yosepha possibly see in a disgusting creature like you?”

“Disgusting? I am handsome as fuck, I’ll have you know.”

“I did not mean your appearance. You have the personality of a—”

“You think I’m hot. Knew it.”

She turned to face him and stomped one foot against the stone. “I said enough! Enough of this vile conversation. What do I have to do to earn your aid?”

He chuckled again. “I thought about maybe asking for a strip tease. But you’ve been doing that this whole time.”

She blinked at him, then blinked down at herself. The blood had soaked her silks, and had rendered them utterly form fitting. What fabric that was loose hugged her tight, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Groaning, she hugged her wings about her, hiding her body but leaving her head exposed. Nudity was hardly cause for concern among angels. Humans — and gabriem — had sex almost without pause in Heaven. And mikalim and rapholem occasionally joined them. She had no reason to feel shame, but Romakus’s mischievous attitude made her want to cover herself nonetheless.

“I cannot believe Yosepha had sex with you.”

“And yet, I know what her favorite positions are. She really has a thing for getting cozy on my lap while I’m in control. She likes being small in my hands.”

Jann wouldn’t be able to look Yosepha in the eye, when she returned.

“She... She has seemed... happier, than she had before her visit to Hell.” Damn her and her need to speak truth. The words were out of her mouth, as if compelled by her stupidity, and she knew the beast would take advantage to tease her about them.

But Romakus said nothing. He smiled, and looked down slightly, drifting in thought, but he didn't laugh or tease her. And for a moment, dare she think it, he looked contemplative.

Now she could not help but imagine Yosepha sitting on the giant creature's lap, facing him, wings drooping with bliss, ass penetrated by what was likely a very, very large phallus, while the beast bounced her upon him with one titanic hand wrapped around her small waist. Hours and hours of sex, and—

She looked down and groaned. A trip to the sanctums was in order after this, to bathe, and if she could block out the memories of the corpses of remnants raining upon her, perhaps she would also spend some time in the arms of some adoring humans, too.

“So,” Romakus said at last, “last time I talked to Yosepha, she said keep an eye out for you. Apparently you've been taking trips into Hell, because she has.”

She winced. The council did not want angels visiting Hell. Too many died in the battle against Belor two thousand years ago. But there had been no decree forbidding it. If a mikalim wanted to visit Hell, to scout or ensure the spires were not looking to attack the False Gate portal, it was their choice. A choice her friend Yosepha had been using a lot lately.

“You talk with her?”

“Yeap. She has lots of questions about the Damall.” Laughing, he brought in one of his wings, twice as massive as her own, and idly plucked at one of its claw tips with his hand's claws. “I don't tell her much, but she keeps coming back. Pretty sure she really just wants to fuck me.”

For some reason, the gorujin enjoyed getting a rise out of Jann. Better to ignore his crass comments.

“You work for the Damall?”

“I do.”

“That explains some things, at least.” After another heavy sigh, she spread her wings, and glared at Romakus. There was no point in hiding her body from him, it only played into his game. “What now, then? Will you escort me to the surface?”

“We’re near the spire. Thousands of grems and imps, and hundreds gorgalas and dilojas will be watching the skies. So unless you can get fly straight up, and fast, you’re not going to be able to escape them. You need to get further from here, closer to the outskirts.”

“Then you will escort me—”

“I’m not escorting you anywhere.”

She glared daggers into the demon. “I assume you saved me, so that I may return to Heaven.”

“Yeap.”

“Then I will need help. My grace is drained, and I can’t fight without it. I can’t replenish it here, and—”

“I’m not running around Death’s Grip with you playing babysitter. I don’t want Zel knowing what I’m up to.” He gestured to the hole they’d climbed up. “Hence, you know, all the sneaking.”

“Then your rescue was pointless! What am I—”

Romakus reached into his small leather pouch, plucked the large devorjin heart within, and tossed it to her. Despite very much not wanting to touch it, reflexes took over, and Jann snatched the bloody lump of flesh out of the air.

“Eat up.”

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If... when she got back to Heaven, she was going to give Yosepha a piece of her mind about her new boyfriend.

Janneke slashed up with her sword, shield in her left hand smashing into a rushing impa while she simultaneously slashed an impin from crotch to skull. And as the creature split in two, she turned to the impa she sent to the ground, and cut her in half, shoulder to hip. The sword cut across the stone, its mirror blade leaving a deep scar in the rock. It quickly filled with blood.

“Damn you, Romakus.” She ground her teeth as she faced the tunnel. Behind her lay a dozen imps and grems, a vratorin, a gorgala, and a tregeera. The blood river she’d swam in an hour before seemed clean by comparison to the carnage that now covered her. Blood, guts, death. Wonderful. A powerful and beautiful display of—

She shook her head hard enough to hurt. No. Don't listen to it. Get back to Heaven. Drink of the waters. If necessary, rebirth in the fountain of Ravid. Do not listen to the desires. Think of Ramiel! Remember what happened to her!

Slowly, panting with exhaustion and exhilaration, she marched forward through the tunnels. It was unlikely a group of devorjins would ambush her here. The demons didn't know she was coming. The tregeera had been a difficult battle, but she doubted she would run into more of the tigers, either. Down here in the tunnels, it was mostly grems and imps, scavenging. A part of her hoped another tregeera would come to challenge her. A part of her hoped a devorjin would face her, a proper test of her skills. Both desires were whispers in her mind that did not belong.

She looked back at the demons she left. Their hearts remained. Resonance. Delicious, powerful resonance, just sitting there waiting to be devoured. Thick, juicy flesh, filling her belly, sending pulsing resonance through her, and essence into her grace and body. Maybe another bite?

She snarled as she forced herself to look away. No. Get out. Get moving.

Moving on was difficult for entirely different reasons than she'd expected. Yes, there were demons, and she'd killed them, but the path Romakus had sent her on was small and winding. No threat of running into devorjin in these tunnels; the tregeera tiger, large as she was, walked on all fours when she engaged Janneke. The problem was, if she included her wings, Jann was larger than devorjin. To walk the tunnel, she had to crouch slightly, and bring her wings down and low, flattened to her shoulders and out behind her like she were some surface bird. Uncomfortable, and unguarded. If someone came at her from behind, she would have trouble.

Sighing, she looked down at her shining armor. Shining no longer. Covered in blood, the crimson seeped in through the cracks where the silver-colored metal met at the joints. Beautiful armor, God's armor, created by her batlam rune and powered by her grace, now a mess of blood, like she had been not long ago in the blood river.

That was Hell. Endless slaughter and murder, endless rampaging violence, hungers of all kinds indulged to excess to the suffering of the souls damned to the infernal prison. She had to get out before it claimed her as well. Death here would send her to the Great Tower, but it was not a death she wanted. Not yet.

The tunnel was long. Very long. It stretched on and on, lit only by the occasional amber vein, leaving her often walking slowly so she didn't trip. Romakus had not lied, though, and his directions for which path to take at each branch remained true. And if he hadn't lied about that, then his other

information about the tunnel was likely true. She was in for a long journey, perhaps several days and nights walking before the tunnel finally reached the surface.

She was tempted to go back and come through the tunnel Glor had dragged her through. But, no. Hundreds of demons waited in the cave's main entrance, fucking and eating, and they would swarm her the moment they realized she had no escort. Her only option was to get to the surface, in a place where winged demons would not be able to glide to her and pin her. Romakus ensured her the tunnel would take her up, eventually worming its way up through the guts of a mountain, where it opened near its top. A perfect escape, if not for the dangerous journey.

A fork in the path. She went right as Romakus instructed. Another fork. She went left. Lord help her if Romakus had been wrong.

She grumbled as she relaxed her hands, and her sword and shield disappeared into her grace, tiny flashes of gold that lit the tunnel a few feet before fading into nothingness. It'd take only a moment to resummon them, and she had to preserve what resonance that vile creature's heart had provided. But wandering down a dark tunnel with only the occasional vein of amber, knowing full well demons wandered it, without her shield and sword in hand, was dangerous. She had to—

Noise. Quiet, stirring. Breathing. She crouched low and moved as slow as she could, hiding the quiet clinking of her armor. She didn't summon her weapons, not yet. It'd produce light, and for the moment, stealth was an option. If she found a demon sleeping, perhaps she could kill it and move on without a battle. If she found several, well, one dead demon before a battle raged was better than none.

The tunnel opened up. She sucked in a breath as she rounded the corner, and stared into a large alcove, a swelling in the tunnel large enough to hold many. Several burning bushes lit the huge room of smooth stone, as did amber veins above and below. And a withered tree stood in its center.

Romakus had told her about the alcove with the tree. He had not told her what else she'd find here.

There was only one type of tree to be found in all of Hell. A forbidden tree. A dark, thorny, withered thing, that occasionally grew fruit, fruit demons craved. Jann did not know where the resonance for such fruit came from. Perhaps remnants that died, not scavenged by grems and imps, bled what little resonance they had into the bowels of Hell, only for it to coalesce into fruit? Mysteries only God would have been able to answer, and perhaps the archangels. Answers out of hers, or anyone else's reach.

Janneke stared at the tree, and the fifty or so humans that sat around it. Beaten, tired, battered, torn, and bruised, the humans looked emaciated. Cheeks sunken in, arms and legs thinned until she could see the bones, and ribs showing. They wore clothes, but only tatters, bits of leather wrestled from goorts, or stolen from unsuspecting imps or grems. They all stared at the fruitless tree, empty eyes desperate, and starving.

Jann steeled herself, and stepped forward.

Every single human looked to her. Some were asleep, and were quickly woken by their companions. All of them stared, jaws dropping, and many grabbed each other by the shoulders, eyes still on her.

“An angel!”

“An angel!”

“An angel!”

Jann shook her head, face hidden behind her helmet save for its T slit that exposed her eyes and her mouth. Why couldn't she be rapholem? Their helmets would have done a much better job of hiding her expression, which she knew was a mix of shock and frustration, not the calm, composed, radiant expressions humans likely expected of angels.

“Quiet! I do not know what demons hide near.” She gestured behind her. “A half dozen now lay dead, and—” She didn't get to finish. A dozen humans, those nearest her, ran at her. She almost jumped back, but as they came closer, stumbling over themselves on their scrawny legs, she realized they were looking to the tunnel, not her.

With mouths drooling and eyes wide, they scampered past her and disappeared around the corner. She almost said something about noise, but their light bodies and bare feet made little sound. Were they... going to eat the demons? God help them, the taint would destroy them.

“Oh magnificent one,” one of the humans said, crawling over to her. “Have you come to save us?” Whoever this human was, he was skin and bone, and couldn't stand. He didn't wear flat, leather strips like the others, but a softer fabric, something they probably stole from a succubus or incubus. Whatever it was, it was faded now, a blanket of gray and blood.

Lie to them? No, she would not. She would never. It was not her place, and the very idea disgusted her. Even as the stolen resonance of the devorjin, stolen twice, coursed through her and sent burning desires into her limbs, her mind, and her grace, she would not lie.

“No,” she said. The excited panting of the three dozen humans remaining died. “I am not here to save you.”

“But... but...” The old man reached out, and another human soul joined him. Slowly the woman pulled the man up, and they both glared at her. “But you must. We... we don’t deserve this.”

No, she agreed silently. They did not deserve this.

“That is not for me to decide. I am sorry, dear soul. But I am merely passing through.” She nodded down at the man, and walked past him, leaving a trail of bloody footsteps as she did.

It was their eyes. She did everything she could to avoid looking into their eyes, not wishing to see desperation and fear risen to such an extreme they mixed into madness. But as the human souls each moaned, hopes and dreams raised and crushed in a matter of moments, she couldn’t help but glance to them. She wished she hadn’t.

Slowly, the desperate moans and horrified eyes changed. Their emaciated bodies tightened, flexing. Their eyebrows furrowed, and eyes hardened. While the man she walked past needed help to stand up, the others didn’t. Weak, but not so weak they didn’t prepare themselves for a confrontation.

Jann kept walking. She couldn’t let their predicament stop her. There was nothing she could do for them. They were damned, and until their souls were cleansed, they could not return to the Great Tower. They knew that, too.

But desperate men did not listen to reason.

One of the humans closer to the exit stood in her way, a heavy stick in hand with a sharp rock jammed into its end.

“Cain...”

Jann froze.

“Cain,” another one of them said. “Cain.”

“Cain,” the man behind her said, still holding onto a woman for support. “Cain was right. Cain was right all along.”

She spun around and faced the struggling man. “What do you know of Cain?” Oh no. Oh no oh no.

“The word of Cain taught us.” The man reached down, and scooped up a rock. “He knew what to do with angels.”

There was no way these humans had spoken to Cain. It was impossible. But as the room grew quieter, and the humans grabbed more sticks and stones from the floor of the room, the message became clear.

Janneke summoned her sword and shield, flapped her wings hard, and sent herself into the air above them. But as wide as the room was, it was not that tall, maybe thirty feet. As she sought distance, the humans armed themselves with every rock they could find, and threw them at her. For all their pain and misery, for all the damage the ravaging hunger of Hell had done to their bodies, desperate strength fueled them, and they threw those rocks hard.

They bounced off her armor and shield, mostly harmless, but all the rocks that fell were scooped up and thrown at her again as the humans below grew rabid. Foaming at the mouth, they screamed and roared, no longer caring if nearby demons found them. They threw the rocks harder, and harder, many of them putting every ounce of strength they had into it. And when twenty fist-sized rocks crash into you within seconds, it's hard to ignore. One lucky rock could damage a wing as well, and then she'd have a true fight on her hands.

She looked to the exit. Several humans stood in the way of the small tunnel, armed with sticks topped with rocks, and they stared at her with murder in their eyes.

“Let me pass!”

The humans growled and snarled.

“Eat her heart,” the older one said. “Kill her. Rip off her wings. Eat her heart. We will become like Cain!”

There would be no way out of this except slaughter. She didn't want to kill these souls. It would barely put a dent in the time they still had to suffer in Hell.

“Please, step aside. Let me—”

“The word of Cain is clear! Your flesh will be our redemption!”

Another rock flew at her with surprising speed, and hit her in the helmet hard enough to send her back a couple feet. She was still flying overhead, caught somewhere between a pathetic attempt at hovering, and circling the room. But she had to fly slow, and the souls below were adjusting their aim quickly.

God, why was this happening? Why did this absurd idea never die? There was no word of Cain!



She aimed her sword at the several humans blocking her path. They did not move, waving their ridiculous sticks in the air instead. That was it, then. There was no way out of this other than violence.

The demon resonance coursing through her angel veins relished the idea.

She charged into the first human, and did her best to not pay attention to whoever she was attacking. Try as she might to ignore details, she couldn't help but notice it was a woman, dark skin, and young. Whoever she was, her eyes were filled with nothing but hate and rage, and she swung her club down at Jann as the angel swooped in.

Jann's sword passed through the wood easily, and through the woman's torso, shoulder to hip. Before Jann could meet the woman's glare again, she snapped her gaze away. No need to scar herself with another set of dying eyes.

She turned to face the two men with the dead woman. Similar faces, skin tones, and hair. A family. Before they realized Jann had cut clean through the woman's club, she cut them down, the blade and its mirror sheen slicing through their flesh and bone. She'd cleaved them in half, and their bodies went tumbling to the stone. In the corner of her eye, she could see their insides become their outsides.

She ran. Sword and shield still in hand, she ran into the tunnel, each step sending an echo of sharp noise, metal on stone, through the passageway. If any demons lay in waiting, they would hear her coming from miles away. She would deal with them. It would be easier to slaughter the humans behind her, even the ones who came back with full bellies from eating demon hearts. But she didn't want to, especially not with Glor's resonance demanding she do exactly that.

"Catch her! Bring her down! Tear off her wings and split her skull! Leave no flesh behind! Brothers and sisters, tonight we will feast!" The voice echoed through the tunnel louder than her boots did. For a bunch of starving, raving madmen, the humans found strength when they needed it. They were chasing her.

Just keep running. She wouldn't think about the humans behind her and how easy they'd be to kill. Just keep running. Easy enough, despite the noise. The ceiling was far too low for her to fly, nearly reaching her head, but even in her armor, she could run faster than any human.

God was listening to her thoughts apparently, again, and God was cruel. The tunnel tightened more and more, until she could no longer run. She had to crawl. She growled as she dismissed her sword and shield, fell to her hands and knees, and moved through the ever shrinking tunnel. Romakus assured her she could reach the end, but he hadn't said anything about needing to crawl.

It was not long before the screaming humans found her again. She glanced back over her shoulder and between her flattened wings, and a cold chill shot up her spine as she saw a dozen faces crawling after her. On her knees in her armor, with her wings making every foot she crawled difficult on top of difficult, she was slow, and they were fast. There was nothing stopping them from grabbing her.

One set of hands found her foot. Another found her other foot. Two faces, eyes filled with tears and fury, bodies pressed up against each other, clambering over each other. They squeezed with all their might as they pulled at her feet.

She kicked them. Their weakened bodies were frail, and the first one's face smashed inward, nose breaking along with bone. They screamed as their blood gushed over her foot, but they didn't let go.

"Release me! There is nothing I can do for you!" She kicked again and again, breaking more bones, smashing fingers and wrists, until both humans were forced to let her go, hands mangled messes. But she managed only another few feet through the tunnel before a new set of hands found her feet, more humans climbing over the bleeding, broken bodies of their companions.

She crawled on, kicking at the human souls as they grabbed her and climbed over each other. Soon a half dozen humans, squeezed shoulder to shoulder in the tunnel and frothing at the mouth, grabbed her feet and legs, trying to remove her armor. It could not be removed so easily, but that didn't stop them from trying.

"Give us your heart," one of them said.

"Give us your heart!"

"Blood. Flesh. Give it to us!"

She didn't know if this madness was from starvation, or perhaps the group of humans, large as it was, had managed to kill and eat demons before, tainting them. Maybe they were from the Righteous Horde, or had been helped by them? If the council restarted the patrols, perhaps she'd know! But no, she came down here knowing little, because the damn council—

One of them grabbed the tip of her wings, and she screamed as the damned woman ripped several feathers from her. The mad woman screamed with joy as she waved a few of the once white feathers around, before Jann kicked her in the face hard enough she fell back and dropped them. Another human grabbed them before Jann looked away and crawled on. The poor fool didn't know her feathers held no resonance and little essence for him to devour. She had to get out before they buried her.

The amber lines in the tunnel were almost nonexistent. Sharp rocks cut against her armor, stalagmites she had to crawl around, occasionally breaking them against her knees. The humans behind

her continued to scream and gargle with desperation, even as they tore themselves apart over the jagged stones. Their fingers found grooves in her greaves and pulled, but all they managed to do was drag themselves along the stones with her.

They didn't care about their torn flesh. They didn't care they were squashing each other until they couldn't breathe. They didn't care that they clawed each other and broke each other's bones as they wrestled for her. They didn't care. And if they managed to swarm her, she didn't know if she'd be able to fight them off, not here where she couldn't so much as stretch her wings.

Lord, forgive her.

She summoned her sword. The flash of gold light in the dark half blinded her, and she squinted into the light as she rolled onto her side and faced the ravenous horde. Slowly, as the horde crawled further up her legs and pulled at her wings, she pointed the sword at them.

The blessed mirror metal erupted. The tunnel disappeared in a flash of gold and white, and Jann forced herself to stare through the blinding light, even as it unleashed its power upon the humans around her legs. Flesh seared. Eyes disintegrated. The human screams, temporarily buried in the roaring power of the smiting blast, rose an octave and into sheer screeching agony as the noise of her attack faded.

What was once a couple dozen men and women squeezing through the tunnel to try and capture her became a writhing mess of limbs and pain. They clutched at their melted eyes, fingers tearing through the burned flesh on their cheeks. The smell filled the tunnel, bringing Janneke to nausea as she forced herself to stare at the pain she'd wrought.

Even in their confused agony, the humans still clawed and grabbed, but they no longer did to her. Blind and broken, they grabbed onto whatever they could, rocks, each other, and screamed as they shook what their blind hands found. She crawled away, but continued to stare behind her as the horde screamed after her, lost in their fury and in the pain of losing their eyes and skin.

"God must be undone!" one of them screamed.

"Undo God!"

"All angels must die!"

For all their pain and madness and charred lips, they continued to speak. Once they realized what had happened, they crawled after her, letting each other go, but their speed was reduced to almost nothing, blind as they were. They couldn't go two feet without entangling each other. They were doomed.

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Eventually the tunnel opened up, and she was free to stand up again. The humans hadn't been able to keep up with her, blind and burned as they were. She could still hear their screams, and she wasn't sure how much of that was from the echoes.

They wanted to kill her. To eat her. She'd expected fury and desperation; all denizens of Hell reacted with pure desperation when an angel passed by, and fury when they realized they were not to be saved. Jann did not spend much time in Hell when it was more common, for that very reason. Now she almost never came here, and only now because of Yosepha.

After tonight, she wouldn't be returning for some time. She was never leaving the baths again. Perhaps she could spend the next hundred years doing nothing but washing the blood off her and out of her feathers. And how long had it been since she last enjoyed the touch of a human soul in Heaven? After tonight, she knew she'd have a hard time looking at any of them.

She sighed as she flared out her wings, embracing the new space available to her. Slowly, she looked down at her empty hands, and the metal of her gauntlets. Never, in her thousands of years of life, had she ever smote humans. She knew what it would do, but never had she been forced to use it.

Don't think about it. Don't think about the screams. She had more important things to worry about for the moment.

The word of Cain had spread, if it reached Death's Grip. It mattered little what damned souls did with their time in Hell, but it was startling nonetheless. If another Righteous Horde suddenly began, another group following the fairy tales of Cain, it would no longer be an ignorable problem.

Sighing, she took a deep breath, and continued on.

No wonder few demons used this offshoot tunnel, and why those humans used it. Had, used it. It was long and seemed to go nowhere. The humans had likely run into it to escape demons, and continued on and on, only stopping when they stumbled upon a forbidden tree. Remote as it was, the tree had likely held several fruit when the humans found it.

They'd been starving for months.

She squeezed her hand inside the armor glove until her blood pulsed. She was no gabriem. Battle called to her as surely as any mikalim. So why did this bother her so much? Why did she care what the

damned suffered? It was their own fault. Was it so hard to go through a life on the surface without wishing ire upon others? Without devolving into...

Yes, it was hard. The gabriem had explained to Jann multiple times over her many years, the sort of trial and hardships some humans on the surface were forced to go through before death. Yes, for some of them, it was hard, victims of circumstance. And knowing that made seeing these damned souls all the harder. How long would they suffer before returning to the Great Tower? Some of those faces she'd seen tonight had numbers as high as 500 carved into their foreheads. How long would their agony last?

She walked through the tunnel, and once it opened into a massive cave, she took a deep breath, and flew through it instead. Thick amber veins lit the path, and she at last let herself relax. Not so relaxed she dismissed her batlam rune, but relaxed enough she let herself find a nice half flying, half gliding pace.

It took time to get through the tunnel, a long time. While amber veins and the occasional burning bush lit her path, there was little else in the lengthy tunnel. Which left her, alone, with her thoughts. Her, alone, with the alien hunger Glor's heart had summoned. Tiny, inkling thoughts crept up through her, whispering dark temptations and drawing darker images. Her atop a mound of corpses, wings radiant, body naked, covered in blood as she raped and killed and devoured any and all she wished.

Nausea followed soon after, and she forced the thoughts away as best she could. Think of Heaven. Think of its soothing waters. Think of the warm embrace of her fellow angels, and perhaps those of loving, adoring humans, of the souls worthy of Heaven. Think of her bed. Think of the gorgeous, endless clouds of Heaven that lay between the Heavenly Islands. Think of her perch in the golden towers of Ravid. Think of quiet, blissful nights and the stars above.

The tunnel grew larger, and soon other tunnels connected to it. Now was no longer the time for a quiet, gentle flight, but speed. She flapped her wings hard, and bits of gold glittered over them as she poured the strength of her grace into them, lighting the cave as if she were a shining beacon. Which meant every nearby demon would see her coming. But with the element of surprise, hopefully she'd fly past them.

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A day later, wings aching, body sore, limbs trembling with exhaustion, she reached the tunnel exit. At some point it'd stopped being a tunnel and became a deep pit of sorts, something for her to fly up; harder, fighting gravity. And whenever she had to pass a group of demons, she did so quickly.

She half expected to find Romakus at the exit, pointing and laugh. But he wasn't. Instead she found nothing more than a cave entrance, sloped and pointed upward. The burning skies of Hell awaited her, and she soared up to meet them. False Gate was several days of hard flying away, but high up, she could fly quickly without issue, riding the currents.

And most of all, no demons could reach her, high in the sky. Not even those accursed imps and grems.

She stared down at the mountains below, the jagged, cruel mountains of Death's Grip. Its spire sat many miles away, but still visible, so tall it scraped the sky. And tall as it was, it still didn't compare to the mountains of the territory. Some of them were truly massive, and she'd exited from the tip of one of them. It'd been a long flight.

She took off toward False Gate and the vortex, letting the hot winds beneath lift her higher and higher, until Hell was a distant place below. Free. She was free. No one could stop her now. The sky, even Hell's sky, was the domain of angels.

Below her, the land rolled by. The mountains of the enormous land of Hell slipped past her, and soon she could see the deep basin and endless canyons of the Grave Valley. Beyond them, the Red Pits, a vast plane of crimson. And beyond them, False Gate. The many cathedrals of rock and metal that dotted its roving lands of stone and lava were specs in the distance. But the vortex, the great swirling maelstrom of energy, lightning and fire and death, it was visible from any corner of Hell.

From up here, she could also see the center of the vast land. She stared at it, at the dark clouds that hovered over it, and the pure darkness that buried it where no amber grew, where no bushes caught flame. The Forgotten Place. She shivered just looking at it, and tore her eyes away from the black depths of the center of Hell, before setting her eyes back to the vortex over False Gate.

Back to Heaven, and to have a stern word with Yosepha about her vulgar, if oddly intriguing, and frustratingly handsome boyfriend.