

~~Mia~~

“Bitch?” Mia said, and did her best righteous indignation expression.

Acelina laughed, a mean and sinister sound.

“The queen hasn’t visited today. Her mind is preoccupied, with you.”

Frowning, Mia tilted her head as she looked between the three super tall demon ladies. The two in the back continued to click and chirp at each other, while the one in front of her grinned a big, scary grin.

This was a new species of demon Mia hadn’t seen before. Nine feet tall, taller than Kas — since he never stood up straight — with very wide hips and an unusually tiny waist, topped with breasts so massive they were ridiculous. Her legs and arms were both long, too, giving her a shape similar to a tall runway fashion model, times a million. Even the hooves, when combined with her very upright posture, gave her the catwalk cat walk. Her tail was long but thin, no weight to it, and didn’t affect her movement at all, and her wings, while huge, seemed really thin and bony, with webbing that seemed awfully fragile. No chance she or the two other girls could glide with them.

It was the face and head that had Mia struggling to keep looking at her. She had no eyes, with a black forehead just like Kas and the satyr demons Mia had seen, which Mia had to assume were all bone hard like Kas’s head. But this woman’s face, her whole head, was completely black, scarily completely black. If Mia put a few white dots on it, it’d have looked like the night sky back on Earth. The four huge horns that came up from it were also very regal, very crown-like, not for fighting, all for posturing and showing off.

The scariest part was her mouth. Her mouth, somehow able to move the black skin, was really wide, and filled with really big scary sharp white teeth. Like Kas’s teeth, except hidden inside lips that, when closed, made it look like the woman had no facial features at all. Just a flat, featureless black mask, until she exposed her horror smile.

Then there was the fashion. All three tall demon ladies wore red silk, big scarf things that hung over their bodies, loose and carefree, just like Zel. They held their wings snug to their backs, with thumb claw hooked over their shoulders and around their necks, so they looked like big cloaks. All of them were bald, but considering the shape and size of the crown-like horns, bald worked well.

It was the jewelry that caught Mia’s eye. They had all sorts of jewelry, more than Zel, necklaces and belly chains and bracelets and anklets and nipple chains. Lots of nipple chains. Lots of skulls. All of

it was a beautiful arrangement of black metal chains, with skulls hanging off their metal links. Small bones pierced their nipples, along with other piercings along their skin made of black metal. Piercings along their stomach. Piercings along their arms and legs. Piercings along their neck. All subtle, hidden things, tiny black dots in certain places, tiny loops in others. Beautiful, and terrifying, even more so than other demons.

It did get kind of annoying that every demon was so massive. Even the succubi and incubi were all tall. Only the imps and grems were actually shorter than Mia. This bitch was as tall as Diogo, meaning Mia's head was literally at her waist.

Kas clicked a few times. Acelina clicked back a few more.

Grumbling, Mia backhanded Kas upside the arm. Which honestly surprised her. Was she that comfortable with him yet? Something about his asshole demeanor and willingness to be completely honest and brutal with her about whatever they talked about made it easier for her to relax with him. She couldn't even give Zel an angry face without paralyzing with fear, but Kas she could apparently hit.

Kas grunted and shrugged.

"Acelina was wondering if your aura is real."

"It is." Wow. The lack of her own hesitation surprised her again.

The busty bitch nodded. With her mouth closed, her face was a completely black thing, and when she turned enough that Mia got a peek at her profile, the first thing she noticed was the strange similarities between her and Zel. Almost no nose. She had the mask-like face shape Zel had, and was utterly beautiful, even with all her facial features hidden in the obsidian darkness of her face's skin color. It was unfair how hot she was, with tits that utterly defied reason, and ass and thighs to match.

"Show me," Acelina said, and again her scary big smile emerged from the darkness of her face. Okay, yeah, super hot, but that smile was straight up horror material. It was like seeing a shark's mouth in the dark.

"No." Mia folded her arms across her chest.

Acelina clicked a few times in her throat before gesturing down to Mia with one of her long arms, and a set of long claws.

"If it weren't for Zel's interest in you, I would rip out your heart where you stand, meat."

"Yeah, I'm getting that a lot, and I'm kind of tapped out on being afraid of everything all the time. Get back to me in a few days and try again."

Acelina stared down at her — probably, hard to tell without eyes — and growled quietly, but a hint of a smile with some teeth showed through after a while.

“I can feel the aura regardless, meat. A quiet thing, barely there, but it is there. You do not know how to suppress it completely. For a soul to even have an aura is stranger than your lack of a mark.” Acelina talked with a bit of that regal sound, kinda like Zel did. It was annoying. “As much as it annoys me, I can understand why Zelandariel keeps you alive. You are a mystery.”

Kas clicked twice. “She’s a pain in the ass.”

“I can see that.” And of course the bitch with the face of tar pit grinned down at her.

“I’m showing her the hatchery so she leaves me alone,” Kas said.

Acelina went quiet, grin disappearing and face going full black hole mode again. But after a few seconds of odd silence, Acelina nodded and gestured to one of the huge flesh tunnels.

“Follow me, then.” And ahead she went, big butt on stilts swaying left and right with each step, tiny long tail slithering behind her, wings hanging with space between them so Mia’s eyes couldn’t help but be hypnotized by the way her curves moved.

Mia glanced over at the other two ladies. They watched her, clicking, talking to each other, and they both offered her some more of those evil smiles that sent a chill down her spine. As absurdly beautiful, scary, and sexy as these three ladies were, they were also kinda creepy. All demons were scary, but creepy was a different vibe, a ‘might crawl out of my TV set and kill me’ vibe. The fact Acelina was covered in chains and skulls along with her red silks only made the woman more scary.

But, Mia really was burnt out on being scared all the time. Fuck being scared. Plus she had a bodyguard now, and he’d been an enforcer at a dueling pit before that. Surely he’d be able to kick serious ass if he had to.

“Kasimiro is a sarkarin,” Mia said. Considering the breed name, and how Kas looked, she didn’t even have to guess that other humans probably called his race sharks. “What are you?”

Acelina clicked several times as she turned her head, and aimed her eyeless face over her shoulder back at her.

“If it weren’t for my love of Zel, I would punish you.”

“Yeah well, like you said, Zel wants to keep me around. Besides, not like I’m asking a horrible question.”

Acelina clicked once, hard and loud, as she looked back to the path.

“I am zotiva. But many call us spire mothers, or simply mothers.”

“Spire mothers?”

She didn’t answer. Mia was tempted to push her on it, but considering how much Acelina didn’t like her, getting one answer was pretty good.

But maybe she could go for two anyway?

“How do you know Diogo?” she asked.

Acelina stopped, half turned, and glared down at Mia. How she managed to do that so well with no eyes was a mystery.

“Do you know what I do to unruly children?”

“Uh…”

Kas clicked a few times, and gently tapped his much, much larger tail on the floor. Whatever he said, Acelina took it in stride, grumbling, and resumed the tour.

Remnants dangled from the walls of flesh and bone, groaning and screaming, but as they went deeper into the tunnel, the amount of remnants faded to almost nothing. A few still dangled from the giant rib bones ceiling, but it did seem like there were a lot less of them. But as if Hell couldn’t dare let Mia get comfortable, the floor she’d carefully been navigating, jumping from big bone to big bone, stopped having bones to walk on. All that remained, was a floor of flesh.

She sucked in a breath as she forced herself to look down. The floor wasn’t skin, but a giant slab of muscle, not bleeding but it still felt exactly like muscle, warm and pulsating. It was alive. God, every step she took really hammered her with that strange reality, that Hell was a-fucking-live.

And somehow, she still didn’t see the next room coming.

There were holes in the walls of varying sizes, all of them close to the ground—er, flesh floor. And the holes pulsated slowly, same as the floor did, just more obviously, more like an… orifice, that wanted to push something out. And one of them did.

That was an egg.

“What the fuuuuck…” Mia took a small step forward, but froze as another demon moved around the room. A big room, like the others, but this one was covered in eggs. Dozens. Hundreds. Each egg sat on the floor in a groove in the muscle, varying shapes and sizes, with some eggs fighting for space. Some eggs were tiny, like a loaf of bread, others were a few feet tall, ovals.

They didn't even have the courtesy to be white eggs, or maybe blue, or have colorful dots on them. Nope, all black, with some red blemishes on them. They looked moist, too, as if someone had dipped them in a blood bath.

Another one of the demons like Acelina, a spire mother, walked among the eggs, squatted down, adjusted them, and moved along to do the same to more. Just like Acelina, this one was ridiculously tall, ridiculously curvy with an extremely tiny waist, and all sorts of scary jewelry. Every step she took was the most exaggerated, sensual, beautiful thing, with a hip sway that was hypnotizing. Combined with the chains, especially the belly chain and the skulls dangling from it, it was practically a dance.

"Pavia," Acelina said, strutted up to her fellow zotiva, and gestured back to Mia and Kas. "This is the little irka Zel told us about." Irka?

Pavia looked past Acelina to Mia, and showed the exact same sort of crazy, scary smile that would have made Pennywise proud, in a black void face.

"She truly is unmarked."

"Zel didn't exaggerate," Acelina said. "Unfortunately she didn't mention the tiny ingrate has a tongue."

Mia folded her arms and glared, which sent Pavia into a fit of laughter.

"Delightful," Pavia said, and she and Acelina walked over to join them. "Have you tasted her yet, Kas? She is a tiny thing, and delicious looking. I bet she would squirm."

Okay, so Acelina was a bitch, but Pavia seemed to be a flirty sort, and her grins looked somewhere between evil monster smile, and actually kinda seductive. It was hard to tell, considering all Mia could see of their mouths was the big white sharp teeth. But Pavia carried herself with a little less pompousness, and once she was close enough to Mia, she squatted down in front of her.

"I haven't slept with any demon," Mia said, doing her best to look at Pavia in her obsidian, featureless face, and not look down at her insane curves. Like Zel and Acelina, she had nipple piercings, and had three chains of different lengths connecting them. The red silk hanging over her tits was too see-through to hide any of it.

"Oh my. Not even Adron? I heard he helped escort you here. He is quite the mischievous fellow." Pavia said 'mischievous' the same way a woman back on Earth would have said 'fun and sexy'. And Adron was definitely that.

“Diogo wanted me unspoiled, for Zel.” It took effort to say that with the most deadpan, serious tone and facial expression Mia could muster. It was meant to sound like a bad thing, because being treated like some sort of prize, like a piece of meat, was finally starting to piss Mia off, now that the fear of being taken to some mysterious queen named ‘Zel’ was wearing off. And Mia mostly succeeded in making it sound like the horrible thing it was.

But Pavia just chuckled, nodded, and stood back up.

“You do have an aura, little Mia. I am sure Zel will find ways to exploit that.” Wonderful. “But,” Pavia continued, “you are in luck. Zel has been in a good mood, since your arrival. You are a puzzle piece she’s been missing.”

“I’m not a puzzle piece. I’m a person.”

The three demons looked between each other, and Acelina grumbled as she clicked a couple times, gesturing to Kas again.

Kas clicked back, slowly lifted his huge tail, put it between him and the two boob ladies, and gently pushed Mia away while taking a step forward. Okay, yep, she’d crossed a line, having the nerve to say she was a human being. Pavia’s evil little grin was almost kinda cute, but Acelina’s was a full-on sneer.

Time to defuse the situation.

“So, uh, eggs. Coming out of... the... walls...” She gestured to the flesh walls, their orifices that were—yep, those were moist orifices. And oh god, one of them was laying another egg right now, a small one.

Pavia clicked in her throat a few times, high pitched, maybe even excited, as she walked back into the room and its center.

“Yes yes. Come, see.”

Acelina eyelessly glared down at Mia and Kas, but after a while she stepped back and followed her fellow spire mother.

“I don’t understand,” Mia said. “Where are the eggs coming from? How did they get made?”

“Betrayers never understand. I suppose you wouldn’t either.” Acelina stood near Pavia, adjusted her wings, and gestured out to the walls. “Hell is alive.”

“I’m...” Mia gulped as she looked down at the muscle under her feet, the rib bones on the walls, and the slow, heavy, deep thud that accompanied each pulse and flex of the flesh walls. A heartbeat? “Like, alive alive?”

Pavia clicked once, nodding. “She is alive, and she births everything that lives within Hell.”

Mia rubbed her arms as she slowly looked at the eggs around her. “Can I... touch one?”

Acelina grumbled, but both mothers eventually nodded.

Mia smiled as she squatted down in front of one of the smaller eggs. The walls hadn’t placed it there, the mothers had. Even as Mia touched it, and shivered at the wet, hot sensation of the weird bony texture, both mothers crouched down in front of some eggs of their own and rotated them. Others, they made sure got a little more contact with the fleshy floor, and others they moved closer or further from other eggs. Spire mothers. They took care of the eggs.

“What kind of demons are in here?” she asked.

“Most kinds,” Pavia said. She approached one of the orifices, and effortlessly slashed and killed a remnant who’d had the audacity to grow too close. As always, the remnant collapsed in a gory mess of soft flesh and easily broken bone, and Pavia used her wing to wipe it away. The blood soaked into the flesh floor even faster than it would have on Hell’s rock and stone surface outside.

“Most?”

“Older breeds,” Acelina said, and she gestured to herself, Pavia, and Kas, “they are birthed less often with each passing century, while the younger breeds forever spawn in greater numbers.” She gestured to the small egg Mia touched. “And the imp in that egg will join their ridiculous swarm.”

“You can tell it’s an imp?”

Grumbling all the more, Acelina shrugged. “I am a spire mother.” As if that explained everything.

“Uh, and they hatch here?”

“No,” Pavia said. “We move them to the hatching pit when it’s time.”

“Hatching pit?”

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The egg room had been well cared for, with Pavia and Acelina, and probably the other two spire mothers, constantly walking around, killing remnants, and rotating the eggs to keep everything perfect. They wanted to make sure all the eggs hatched.

The hatching pit was completely different. It took them a little while to get to it, and the closer they got, the louder the background groans and screeches became. Screams, but not the scared kind. Moans, but not the sexy kind. Screams of fighting, moans of exertion.

It was a huge room. Beyond huge. Football stadium huge, a colossal room filled with enormous rocks, cages dangling from chains and filled with remnants, and enormous white spikes of bone that stuck out from the flesh walls. Movement was everywhere. Demons jumped from rock to rock, big and small, squeaking and yelling and roaring. Demons ran between the rocks, pushing each other out of the way.

The little demons fought, and ripped each other to pieces.

Mia covered her mouth, eyes wide, staring at the pit below her. It was like the fighting pit Zel had shown her yesterday, but so much bigger, much much deeper, and inside it were hundreds of demons and empty egg shells. Bones littered the floor, as did corpses, and tiny imps and grems chewed at the flesh of bigger, dead demons while young tiger ladies, vrats, succubi and incubi, brutes, gargoyles, and a few other kinds drifted around.

For some reason, it reminded Mia of high school, with cliques and stuff, except the cliques were a mix of demon types. Maybe hatchlings who'd hatched at similar times? However they came to form their groups, it wasn't breed specific, and the imps and grems didn't seem all that interested in following them. The little rascals hopped around, banging bones together like drum sticks sometimes, chuckling super evilly like anyone would expect from a stereotypical small demon troublemaker. The other demons were a lot more careful, but even they still roamed around, chatting, climbing on big rocks or bigger piles of empty egg shells and bones, before they got into fights with other demons.

Oh god it got worse. Mia stared down at the huge pit, and the shadows along the floor. They weren't shadows. They were holes. There was a network of tunnels.

"How... How big is this place?" she asked.

"Big," Acelina said. "There's at least a few miles of tunnel, though none of them lead to rooms as big as this one. This is the only entrance and exit to the hatching pit."

"You put the eggs in here?"

"Yes."



“And they hatch and... and... what? Demons just run around, killing each other?”

Acelina grinned at her with that big scary smile of hers. “Indeed. We might throw them a soul every so often, but for the most part, they kill each other to get their food.”

“Oh god. That’s fucking horrible.” Mia clutched her stomach. The floor of the pit was flesh, but all around the pit the enormous walls were made of metal, and were perfectly smooth. No one got out of the pit unless someone helped them out.

Kas shrugged, clicked once, and gestured down at the hundreds of demons wandering around, some going down into the tunnels, some coming out.

“It’s how we earn the right to be adults,” he said.

“It’s still fucking horrible. Why not just... let them all out and do their thing out there?” Mia gestured back to the path they’d walked in from.

“That’s how things used to be done,” Acelina said, “and Hell was chaos, so the tale goes.”

Much as it was sickening, watching young demons drift around in a giant pit, fighting each other and killing each other, Acelina made a point. How horribly chaotic would Hell be if there were even more demons everywhere, and they had to kill each other constantly just for an opportunity at a meal? It was still sickening, but it wasn’t hard to picture Hell so fucked up and horrible that the demons wouldn’t even have been capable of communication, regressed to nothing more than starving animals, forever fighting for food among waves and waves of newborns.

“How long ago did you start... doing things like this?” She gestured down at a gargoyle girl who sat on a big rock by herself, half as tall as the gargoyles Mia had seen before. Half as tall, but she didn’t exactly look like a child, either. Proportionally she looked older than she must have been, almost like childhood was skipped? Or at least, partially skipped?

“Some time during the first age,” Acelina said, shrugging. “Hundreds of thousands of years ago.”

“Oh.” Well, shit. This was beyond normal for demons, then. It wasn’t some band-aid solution for their shitty circumstances, but an aspect of their civilization older than anything any human civilization considered integral to their culture. No wonder demons were all either really fucking nasty, had strange senses of humor, or were carved out of wood. Anyone who survived a childhood like this had to be strong, and twisted.

It was in a spire’s best interest to only let strong demon children survive, if the demon children were to grow up and defend the spire from other spires. That was a thing, according to Adron, that

spires occasionally fought, and if they didn't want to get destroyed, the spire ruler needed to be strong and summon a horde who could fight the invading force. Or, of course, be the invading force.

“So spire mothers help?”

Acelina shook her head. “Only until the egg has finished hatching. Otherwise it would defeat the purpose. They must reach maturity on their own.”

“Then what do mothers do? You just... watch?”

“Watch, and once they reach maturity, we remove them, examine them, ensure they meet the standards we deem, and we explain the rules of Death's Grip.”

Pavia joined Acelina's side. “And treat them right, if they're old enough and have done particularly well.”

Both ladies chuckled and grinned. Big, evil, scary smiles. But at least Pavia seemed a bit nicer.

Well, Mia had answers to her questions, they just weren't very nice ones. For some stupid reason, that'd surprised her. Something about knowing demons had children, eggs, and they hatched and stuff, had given her weird mental images of demons... not being horrible? Like maybe a weird little family, hatching eggs and hunting for their children and stuff, feeding the babies... okay, feeding them human hearts, so still not the nicest image but damn well better than this. Even as she thought about it, she stared down over the wall at the demons, and a fight erupted deep in the pit. Seven young demons tore into each other. Only five walked away.

“Do hellbeasts spawn here?”

“No,” Pavia said. “Hellbeasts have their own hidden little dens where Hell births them. But the spires are the creations of Lucifer, so we are told. And we demons are Lucifer's children.”

Right, Zel had said that. Demons were the children of Hell, and Lucifer. If Lucifer created the spires, and the spires grew — literally — out of Hell, then it all kinda made sense. Much as anything made sense in the afterlife anyway.

“Kas, I think I'm ready to go back to my room. I—” She blinked as she looked past the two tall ladies, and to the glowing runes written on the wall of bone in the back, high above the pit. Someone had somehow managed to write something with amber veins.

Slowly, she walked past the two demon ladies, and did her best to not notice how her head only reached their stomachs. She walked along the edge of the pit, and circled the giant hole until she

reached the huge runes in the bone. How did you write runes with amber veins? She'd seen normal runes carved into stuff, etched, scratched, and all of them had been Estian. This wasn't Estian.

"The ancient language," Pavia said, coming up to stand beside her. "Written into the bones of Hell long ago. Probably when Lucifer created the spires."

"Ancient language..." Was it ancient? It didn't look worn down. It looked brand new. Probably because it was written in what was literal veins of lava encased in some sort of thin, impervious magical glass.

And she could read it.

"The bowels... of Death's Grip... breeds the swarm of the mountain." Mia looked up at Pavia. "Uh, what's that mean? I mean, I guess Death's Grip is a lot of mountains and... and why are you looking at me like that?" Even without eyes, or any facial features really, Pavia's slightly parted mouth looked very stunned.

Mia looked back at Acelina and Kas. Both of them had open mouths, too.

"You can read this?" Pavia asked.

"Yeah. It's weird though. It's not English—er, I mean, Estian. It's some other language?"

Kas came up to her, grabbed her arm, and pulled her toward the exit.

"Come with me."

"W-What? Hey, ow! Jesus, let go! I'm coming already!"

He let go, and she rubbed her wrist as she stumbled after her big dinosaur bodyguard. A quick glance back showed Pavia and Acelina, still staring at her with mouths open.

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"She can read the ancient runes," Kasimiro said.

Zelandariel, standing by a big stone table in her throne room, turned and faced them, one eyebrow raised.

"Excuse me?"

Kas gestured to Mia. “She can read the ancient runes. Unless she was lying, she read the ancient runes over the hatching pit.”

The demon queen’s eyes lit up, and her smile turned absolutely evil, and excited, the sort of smile a dominatrix would wear when successfully getting their sub off. It was unnerving.

“Did you now, little soul.” Zel sauntered up to her, and squatted down in front of her so they could be face to face. Two of her arms rested on her knees, but the other two reached out, and gently held Mia’s shoulders. Intense, disturbing eye contact, the black sclera of Zel’s eyes fully circling her red irises as she opened her eyes wider.

“I wasn’t lying. I... didn’t think that’d be such a big deal.”

“It is another piece of the puzzle. An important one. An essential one.” Nodding, Zel leaned in closer. The woman was literally over twice as tall as Mia, and proportional; her head was twice as tall as Mia’s, too, twice as wide, twice as deep. It was like being inches away from the face of a goddess alien cosmic horror creature, happy to bite her face off, or her entire head off, if she said the wrong thing.

“I... didn’t realize,” she said.

“I am sure you’ve realized by our reactions the we can neither speak nor read the ancient language.”

Holy shit.

“No, I hadn’t realized that.”

“You would have learned sooner or later. It is no secret.” Nodding, Zel stood up and looked to Kas. “Fetch me Adron.”

Kas clicked once, and left, walking off a little faster than he normally did, on all fours with his big tail slowly swaying behind him.

“I was busy,” Zel said, “if you were wondering why I had not come to visit you. But this is more important. You will be coming with me, now.”

Mia shivered, rubbed her arms, and nodded. Not like she could deny Zel, but the evil smile the spire ruler had worn a moment before hadn’t exactly filled Mia with comfort.

“Alright. And, why fetch Adron?”

That might have been a bit too far. She could get lippy with other demons because Zel had declared Mia off limits, but getting mouthy with Zel herself was playing with fire. But thankfully Zel thought her attitude was cute, and she giggled as she grinned at her.

“Because Adron, the sneaky little devil, is someone I can trust, both in talent and in loyalty. I did not know what use you could provide me before this discovery, save for one to be explored later. But now, I have many ideas, and I will not risk your death. I am doubling your guard.”

“Oh.” Oh god, Adron, and Kas? “And... Hannah?”

Zel shrugged. “She is Adron’s pet. I see no issue if she joins him.”

Mia squirmed. Adron and Hannah, two people she’d gotten very close to, sexually speaking, in just several days at that. The feel of Adron’s huge cock underneath her, spreading her slit’s lips apart, pulsing as it poured cum up onto Adron’s chest, the memory sent heat through Mia’s body instantly. It only got worse, remembering the feel of his body against hers, his cock in her hand, while Hannah sank her fist deep into Mia’s body. So much for being in a bad mood.

Oh god, Kas had said he’d had sex with Hannah before, and Adron, at the same time. Images flooded Mia’s mind, of little her between the two huge men, stuffed to the gills and squirming and wriggling, while four huge hands held her down, and—

Zel licked her lips. “You do like him.”

“I... I mean...”

“I have but to say his name and your aura rekindles, like a spark on kindling.” With a playful wink, Zel walked back to her throne, sat down, and motioned for Mia to join her. It was such a big chair of curvy, elegant bones, but Zel and her huge form filled it well, despite how thin she was compared to someone like Diogo or Kas.

There really wasn’t any point in lying about this. Apparently Mia had a damn aura that told everyone nearby if she was horny, and worse than that, Zel was smart. Lying to her was dangerous.

“First day I arrived in Hell, I was horrified. And I still am. But every day here, I’m surrounded by so much sex, it’s really starting to get to me.”

“Diogo showed much restraint, not indulging himself of your small body.” Zel pointed beside the throne.

Mia joined her there, and adjusted her silk toga to hide her bits as best she could.

“Diogo’s a brute, but he seems loyal.”

“As loyal as I can expect of a demon, at any rate.”

“And, um... on the topic of sex. I... wanted to ask about something.” She squirmed.

Zel looked down from her throne at her, and licked a fang.

“Oh?” Zel already knew the question was going to be a juicy one.

“I’ve been seeing women getting... fucked, by some, uh, very... very large phalluses. That korgejin tetrad I saw, the big guy, Saldavin, he was fucking that woman with a huuuuge—” Mia held up her hands, indicating the ridiculous length well over a foot long. “And she was enjoying it. A lot. On the surface, that’d be long enough to really injure her, badly! But she was... so full.”

“This is Hell, little Mia. The rules are different. You don’t eat or drink anymore, do you?”

“No...”

“Your afterlife body is a durable thing. You are no demon, but still, the ebb and flow of resonance and essence lends to different extremes and foundations, down here in the realm of fire and torture.”

“Durable.” Mia patted her stomach. Durable, and evidently stretchy.

“It is a two-edged sword. What joy is durability if every day is torture? Starving to death over many months, hypnotized by a scrying pool, or doomed to struggle with a broken limb you cannot recover from without eating, a wound that should kill you but does not?” Zel set two of her elbows on the throne arm closer to Mia, and leaned toward her. “Imagine the ways a rather vile demon could torture a soul they did not want to die. I have seen more than a few souls in my life with their guts removed, left to suffer for days, sometimes weeks, before the hungry demon responsible for their agony finally devours their heart.”

“Jesus fucking christ.” She patted her stomach again. Even if she didn’t need to eat and digest food or use the restroom, she still preferred having her insides on her insides. Mood ruined. “I haven’t seen anything that bad.”

“I have made it clear to my legions that mindless torture is a vice best left untouched. To exert such control over someone can be intoxicating, addicting, and eventually, all consuming.”

So Zel wasn’t such a bad demon, then? No no, she was definitely a bad demon, and more than willing to torture Mia if she had reason to. Just, maybe not as horrifically bad as some other demons.

Two figures stepped in through the huge archway door. A spark of excitement shot through Mia, and died when she didn’t see Kas or Adron.

That, was two huge demons, bigger than Kas or Adron. Korgejins, the two male tetrad demons that served Zel, giant demons with two wings, hooves, no tail, and a pair of colossal horns. Saldavin, and Kas said the other's name was Gorlus. Saldavin was the one she'd seen fucking a woman on her first day in the spire, and being surprisingly gentle, too. Considering how well endowed he was, some degree of gentle was probably required when fucking a human, or they'd simply break.

Thankfully both demons were unaroused, dicks hidden inside them. They were naked, though, and holy shit they were such goliaths of muscle Mia couldn't help but watch the way their bodies moved.

"Another sighting," Saldavin said, stepping up to the giant stone table. He tapped a claw against something on it.

"How many?" Zel asked.

"Two."

With a sigh, Zel stood up and joined her two companions by the table. She tapped her claw on the table as well where Saldavin had.

"They are definitely looking for something," Zel said. "And I would be a fool to not think it the unmarked girl."

"Maybe," Gorlus said. "You sure you only want Kas protecting her?"

"Adron will be joining Kasimiro. I want the two of you to continue as you were."

Both big boys looked at each other, grumbled, but eventually nodded.

"There's something else," Saldavin said. "I heard a few imps and grems talking about a large goort nearby, by itself, standing on a mountain clockwise from here."

"Which mountain?" Zel asked.

"Imps and grems couldn't remember each other's names, let alone the mountain's."

Groaning, Zel gestured at the table. There had to be a map on it or something.

"Did they at least note the color of the goort?"

Gorlus sucked in a heavy breath. "Pure obsidian."

The expression that cut across Zel's face knocked the wind out of Mia. She looked afraid? It lasted maybe a tenth of a second, before the demon's face hardened, and she idly plucked at one of the skulls hanging from her necklace.

"If the rider is here..."

Saldavin shook his head. “The rider will pass. He always does.”

Zel slapped the huge beast in the back of the head, earning a growl and grunt from the titan, but no retaliation.

“An unmarked soul sits in this very room, with strange abilities, while angels haunt my horizons, the rider reveals himself in the shadow of my spire, and you’re stupid enough to think he hasn’t come here to investigate?” Without looking, another one of her many hands shot out, grabbed Saldavin by a horn, and pulled him closer to her before she turned to glare at him. “Gather the devorjins, and post them at every balcony. Gather the vratorins, and send them scouting. Gather the dilojas and gorgalas, and have them do gliding patrols. If the rider dares approach my spire, I will see him dead! You two may be foolish enough to repeat Damavior’s mistakes, but I am not.”

Not once had Mia ever seen Zel look this way, angry and ready to bite someone’s head off, but wrapped in a cold exterior of pure ice. The two korgejin with her had, though, and they both nodded before leaving, heads slightly lowered. They were scared of Zel, and in more than just the obvious ‘could kill me’ kinda way.

Zel paced back and forth in front of the huge stone table, glaring down at it, both arms folded across her chest.

“I’m surprised,” Mia said, testing the waters. Zel didn’t respond. “Surprised you let me hear all that.”

“If there is a secret to hide, I will hide it. But you knowing the perils of Hell does little to harm me.” Sighing, she looked Mia’s way. “You think of me as some sort of cartoon villain, don’t you?”

Hearing a giant demoness say ‘cartoon villain’ was trippy as fuck.

“I uh, I just didn’t expect you to be so open about it.”

“Alessio wouldn’t, the vile creature. She’d sew a web of lies and have you dancing to her tune. But I am not her.”

No, she wasn’t Alessio, ruler of the Black Valley. Mia remembered that much. Zel acted giggly and soft, and turned hard the moment she had to. First attempt at a psych profile for the demon queen: a cold cruel bitch who enjoyed acting pleasant, like the afterlife was a game to her, but under the mask she was all ice.



Kas returned, Adron at his side. Mia stepped down from beside the thrown, took a quick peek at Zel to make sure she wasn't going to get her head cut off for doing so, and walked up to smile up at the big guy. A hug would probably have been a bit too much.

"Hi," she said, a little higher pitched than usual. Damn it.

"Hello," Adron said, grinning down at her. "Making friends with Zel, I see."

Zel's cold expression vanished, and she put back on her happy, teasing, playful, feminine expression as she walked over to them.

"Adron. There has been a development. Diogo will be heading back to Gorzen Eye without you."

"Oh? Is Hannah staying?"

Zel rolled her eyes. "Of course, because I know it's the only way to guarantee your cooperation, you fool."

Adron shrugged, grin unrelenting. He knew Zel better than Mia thought.

"What's the mission?"

"Guard the unmarked."

"Isn't Kas already doing that?"

"Kas is not sufficient, considering what we only recently learned. Mia is to be kept alive and unharmed, and you and your devious little mind are to preempt any attempts to kill her."

"Preempt? You think someone's going to actually plan to kill her?"

"It is a possibility. You will learn why soon. And besides, I think you will enjoy the other plans I have in store for her and you." With a playful smile, Zel tugged at her nipple chain idly with one hand, while the three others reached down, two took Adron's shoulders, and the final one casually wrapped one of his horns. "If you fail to keep her alive, I will do far worse than kill you, and Hannah's screams will be all you hear until pain and misery sunder your mind into mulch."

Adron gulped, in that comically exaggerated way he loved, nodded, and looked to Kas.

"So you're not qualified to do this solo, buddy?"

Kas grunted, clicked once, and said nothing.

Zel released her demon. "Now, come. To the depths."

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Mia was going to puke. No, wait, she couldn't puke anymore. That didn't stop nausea from hitting her as they, yet again, did some rapid traversal, jumping from balcony to balcony, deep into the tower. Deeper than the balcony with the hatching room. So deep it got dark, and Mia's eyes had to adjust. Not many braziers down here.

There was a bottom. There was no stone down here, no metal save for the balcony over their heads. Just like the tunnel that led to the hatchery, it was all flesh and bone, with only a few tiny veins of amber that cut across the bones, and not enough for Mia to see clearly.

That made the screaming and crying a thousand times worse.

She'd half expected the bottom to be a lava pit or something, but nope, the spire loved flesh, and this deep, it also loved remnants. Hundreds, maybe thousands of them screamed and yelled, and reached out from the walls of muscle and bone. They tore at each other, at themselves, and some of them managed to say words, slurred and garbled, but 'help me' and 'kill me' bubbled up a few times in the chorus of pain and torture.

Mia covered her ears.

Adron walked on her right, Kas on her left, and Zel took lead. Mia managed to smile up at her two bodyguards, but a weak smile, and more than a few times she squealed and jumped up as a remnant reached up from the ground. She could only see a few feet in front of her, and the floor was muscle, sinew, and sometimes a long, wide slab of bone she had to carefully step over. Spotting the remnants wasn't always easy, and one managed to get a hand around her ankle.

Kas crushed the remnant with one fist. Splat. Mia squealed again and forced her eyes away, but not fast enough. The remnant practically exploded, and Mia yanked her ankle free as blood splattered over her legs, and a limb that went flying hit her shin. A remnant was much softer than a human, the exact opposite of what Zel described souls as, and if it weren't for how dark it was in the pit of the spire, Mia would have closed her eyes to avoid seeing the guts everywhere.

"Why's it so dark down here?" she half asked, half yelled to get over the screaming.

The two men shrugged, and Zel didn't answer. Even her small extra horn on her forehead, glowing a gentle amber, provided a lot of light compared to how much the nearby amber veins did. Still not enough light for Mia to see much. But thankfully all three demons started clearing Mia's path of remnants, after the scare.

Another tunnel, the inside of a gutted snake again, rib bones all around with only the occasional amber vein, a floor of bone, and remnants absolutely everywhere. There was no avoiding the mess this time. Zel used her four hands and her horns, and effortlessly slaughtered through the dozens of men and women that reached for her. The remnants came out of the floor as much as the walls and ceilings, and Zel crushed them under her hooves.

Adron and Kas played cleanup duty, walking and killing remnants before wiping the gore off the bone path with their tails. Talking was pointless. The remnants, blurs in the darkness, eyes lit up by the few amber veins just enough for Mia to see some of them, numbered in the thousands. How long did they stay down here, clawing at each other and getting nowhere? How long did it take a remnant to starve to death, with nothing but the screams of other remnants to keep them company?

She did her best to ignore the squishy, warm wet stuff under her feet.

It didn't last forever. Eventually the tunnel ended, and Zel stopped. It was almost pitch black, with only Zel's extra horn providing any light this deep in the tunnel, and she made short work of the remnants nearby. They splattered, the black door soaked with crimson, and the red liquid trickled down over the engravings and sculptures in the door. Its surface was a myriad of skulls, surrounding one big skull in the middle that looked beyond strange, beyond reason, without any sort of shape she could understand. It had horns but they came out in weird places. It had eyes but it had several, and not in any orientation that made sense. It had a mouth, but it looked like something you'd find on a lamprey.

Zel's horn glowed, the strange eyes of the two doors skull pulsed once with amber, something clicked, and the demon queen pushed open the doors.

Light flooded them. Mia covered her eyes, groaning until they adjusted, and followed the three demons into the colossal room. A black surface surrounded them, no flesh. Giant chains dangled from the ceiling, just three, and each held an enormous skull brazier of black, twenty feet overhead. The ceiling must have been a hundred feet up, maybe more, all rock, and the room was easily ten times as wide. A small army could have fit down here.

Kas closed the doors. How there was oxygen down here to breathe with all these fires burning, Mia didn't bother thinking about. The silence was deafening, not a single remnant in sight, not a whisper broke through the doors, and all around them was complete stillness.

And before them stood a cathedral.

"What the fuck," Mia said, and regretted it immediately. Her voice echoed, and she didn't like the way it sounded as it warped and distorted.

Zel, impervious to spooky sounds, giggled and walked toward the cathedral.

“Come, unmarked one. We will learn much together, you and I.” And the look she gave Mia over her shoulder sealed the deal. If Mia didn’t repeat the apparent miracle she’d performed earlier, Zel was going to try out that evisceration torture on her she’d mentioned.

“What kind of place is this?” Mia asked, jogging up to follow behind Zel. Kas and Adron followed behind Mia this time.

“I’m not telling.”

“Uh, what?”

After another feminine giggle, Zel stopped before the cathedral, and gestured out to it with all four arms.

“I cannot have you biased, to perhaps lie to me. I have clues as to what we will learn, you and I, but you will remain ignorant.” So much for getting a little info before going inside.

Cathedral was maybe the wrong word. Castle? It was a wall of metal, except... no, no it wasn’t. In the dark it looked like black metal, but as Mia came closer to the towering door, ice shot up her spine. It was bone. Not bone growing out of the ground, like everywhere else in the spire. The cathedral was made out of bones, charred, and stacked together. Thousands. Tens of thousands. Fucking millions. And unlike the white bones she’d found everywhere else, in their strange shapes that allowed the demons to make furniture, or grew out of walls to create doors, these bones all looked perfectly normal, and human.

The door behind her had been bone, and the door in front of her was made of nothing but skulls.

Mia took a step back and stared up at the wall. There were windows, but no glass, and what she’d thought were metal bars before, she could now see were more bones, stacked vertically and connected at their ends. The cathedral’s front didn’t reach the cave ceiling, but it came close, and the top raised into a point, topped with circle patterns of carvings she couldn’t clearly see from so far. She didn’t have to. They were wreaths of human skulls.

Zel’s horn glowed, and she pushed against the two huge doors, far bigger than the ones they’d just come through. The bones rubbed against each other, but didn’t break or crumble, as if something had cast and molded them in rock. Petrified bone? No chance. But it sounded like rock, maybe some pebbles, and looking down only confirmed. She’d thought she’d been walking on rock, but the ground was nothing but endless black bone, slightly shifting under her weight, and never breaking, not even under Zel’s hooves.

Oh god, even the walls were black bone, stacked sideways. Probably the ceiling, too. Oh fucking god.

“What is—”

Zel snapped her glare at Mia, and Mia winced as she froze. Okay, no questions allowed, at all.

The spire ruler stepped into the cathedral, and Mia followed, eyes first staring down at the various shapes and sizes of bones she walked on — all human — before she looked up.

It really was a cathedral, sorta. She expected to find a ceiling closer to her head, but the inside of the building was basically hollow, almost like the main chamber of a church. Looking back to the middle of the room, she half expected to find pews with how huge it was, but nope, instead she found pillars, each reaching the ceiling, each made of charred bones stuck together, thick enough she wouldn't have been able to get her arms around them.

There were only a few sources of weak light: pits in the center, like someone had dug holes for campfires, and circled them with skulls. In the pit, a burning bush stood, large, with a steady but spindly flame. Past the fire pit was nothing but more open space, pillars, another fire pit, and finally another wall. The place was big enough to hold thousands of demons if they crammed together hard enough, and the doorway big enough to allow something twice as big as Zel inside.

There was a pulpit near the far wall, something so big even Zel would look dwarfed behind it. Even so far away, it was obviously made of more bones, an imperfect shape made of skulls and rib cages, and as Zel and Mia approached, the crisscross of bones that made up its top came into view. She was wrong about the fire pits being the only source of light. An amber light glowed at the top of the pulpit, too high for Mia to see what it was.

Zel stepped up behind the pulpit. It stood on a stage with small stairs, thousands of bones that'd been stacked perfectly and somehow held their shape as Zel's heavy body weighed on each. But even at the top of the stairs behind the pulpit, she had to reach up to touch its surface. Whoever used the pulpit had been almost twice as tall as Zel.

She stepped down from the small stage, a giant book in hand, and grinned down at Mia as she sat on the edge of the stairs. The way Zel was not only comfortable and happy to do things herself, but move around like a normal person and not a pompous queen wearing a corset and crown, made her endearing. That wasn't good. Much better to keep her framed as an evil, conniving bitch who'd rip out Mia's guts the moment she thought Mia's life didn't matter. The truth was somewhere in the middle, but better safe than sorry.

“Come, sit,” Zel said, gesturing to the small stairway that surrounded the stage.

Mia squinted at her, but Zel’s smile remained. The demon held the giant book on her lap with two hands, while two other hands idly plucked at her necklace and her nipple chain with her black claws. She was excited, fidgeting, and didn’t want Mia to notice. Well, Mia did notice, because she’d been halfway through Psych 201 before she died. She was great at reading people! Okay, that was a lie, but she was getting better at it.

After a hopefully unnoticeable gulp, she stood beside Zel on the stairs.

“That is a scary looking book,” Mia said, gesturing to the cover. “Pretty sure I’ve seen something like this in Evil Dead.”

The book cover wasn’t made of skin, but more of the black bone everything else was made of. Someone had somehow merged the bones horizontally, hundreds of small bones, probably from fingers. Subtle amber glow came from between them, from the pages underneath. A single skull decorated the cover, almost like emerging from black water. The amber light underneath it came up through the empty eyes, nose, and between the jaw.

“You... sure you want to open that?”

Zel chuckled and looked up at Mia; her sitting down meant Mia, standing beside her, had a few inches on her.

“I have opened it before.” She traced some claws down the cover before looking to the door. “Kas, Adron, wait outside, in the tunnel.”

Mia snapped her eyes up to the door of the cathedral. Kas and Adron stood there, and without hesitation, they both nodded, closed the cathedral doors, and headed back toward the tunnel. Zel did not move until she heard the second pair of doors close. Mia was officially alone with the queen of Death’s Grip, and what might as well have been a book of evil spells and summoning rituals in her hands. If Mia couldn’t do what Zel was hoping she could, there’d be hell to pay.

Slowly, Zel opened the book. The silent room turned into a black hole. Something sucked the life out of it, and the light, too. Mia forced herself to breathe, tore her eyes away from the runes written on the pages, and looked back out to the fire pits with the burning bushes inside them. Still there, still burning, still quietly crackling. Just a figment of her active imagination.

“Every page in this book is written in the ancient language,” Zel said, and she traced a claw down the amber runes, still plucking at her bracelets, necklaces, and nipple chains. Excited, or nervous? Maybe even a little scared?

The pages were black, too, and from the way Zel's claws dragged over them, making quiet scraping sounds, they were made of stone. Someone had managed to capture the amber veins inside slivers of rock not even a millimeter thick. Holy shit.

Mia's eyes locked onto the runes under Zel's claws. They were large, only enough for a few on the first page, and they stood up and begged to be read.

"Death's Grip. Lucifer. Belial," Mia whispered.

Zel sighed with bliss, and turned the page.

Whoever wrote the runes was a professional calligrapher. The glowing lines flowed across the page, a bit smaller than the first page, but still only half a dozen runes.

"You... want me to read all this?"

"Perhaps. That will depend on what we find. Go on."

After a long, heavy breath, Mia looked down at the colossal pages, and began.

"This child of mine, Belial, they shall rule Death's Grip and all within."

Zel's grin dripped with hunger, and she turned to the next page.

"I have wrought my will upon my kin, and have blessed this land with death."

Zel shivered. Mia might as well have whispered dirty talk in her ear, with how she was reacting. The cathedral agreed. The burning bushes exploded with light, the fires grew until they reached far and high, and rumbling crackling sounds buried the silence.

"Oh my," Zel said, looking to the flames. "Continue." With a starving claw, Zel slowly turned the stone page.

Mia took another deep breath and wiped some sweat from her forehead. Reading this was... tiring.

"In these mountains, scarred, burned, and molded, Belial's brood fight amongst themselves."

"As I suspected," Zel said, "these weren't written by Belial. They were written by Lucifer."

"Holy shit." Mia took a small step away. "Should I really read this? Stuff written by Satan himself?"

"Presumptuous to assume one of the archangels was male, a being that sailed the cosmos long before life existed, before men and women. Before bacteria."

That was a good point. Even demons didn't really fit the male female roles considering they weren't the ones reproducing. But Zel was obviously female physically, and Adron, Diogo, and everyone else called Zel 'her'. How did that work?

She was stalling. She didn't want to read from a book Satan wrote. Who would? It might as well have been written in Latin, with her unwittingly summoning the archangel with some mysterious passage. At any moment, orchestral music complete with Gregorian chanting would start playing.

Mia forced herself back in close to Zel's side, and the demon queen turned the page.

"Rise, children of my first. Rise. Obey. I shall rip the fire asunder, and reclaim the Heavens."

The burning bushes brightened again, the fire reached higher, and the roaring sound grew louder. Hot wind cut through the cathedral, and it howled. The runes on the pages brightened too, and Mia winced as the light brought tears to her eyes.

Zel didn't turn the page. With teasing claws, she teased the dark stone, eyes locked onto the glowing runes she couldn't read.

"This place," Zel said, gesturing around with one of her other many hands, "was a place of worship. Demons paid tribute to our most unholy here, and to his nine children."

"Tribute?"

Nodding, Zel ran yet another hand along the floor, and her claws made quiet ting sounds as they clicked over the bones. Oh god, the bones.

"I feel like... like reading this is casting a spell?"

Zel's grin grew big enough to expose her fangs, and she slowly turned the page.

"Come," Mia said, continuing to read for some reason, "children of Hell and Belial, crafted by my hand. Children of the Great Tower. Children of sin. Come, my agents of justice. Prepare for war."

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~~David~

"Alright, I got it this time." Nodding, he pressed his whole body up against the boulder.



It hadn't been easy, getting a rock big enough into a place where they had a bit of a cliff overhang, but they did. One small rock he rested the sword against, and the big boulder was pushed up to it so the hilt and a bit of blade rested underneath it.

The plan was simple. Drop a big rock on the sword from above. The big rock David pressed against would stay over the bottom half of the sword. The lever rock in the middle would apply the pressure needed to snap the blade in half so it wouldn't be so damn heavy.

Or it'd snap the blade off at the hilt and make it useless. But he couldn't use a sword that weighed at least fifty fucking pounds.

Fifty pounds. Divide by two point two. Twenty-one? Twenty-two kilograms? He did the pointless math in his head as he quadruple checked the position of the rock and sword, held up a hand, and aligned them with the giant rock teetering on the edge overhead.

He gave the thumbs up, and backed up around a bit of the cliff path. A nasty engineering accident in his youth had taught him the value of putting a wall between him and any potential explosion or breaking object. Thankfully he, and his guardian at the time hadn't been injured, but Derek's garage did get a big nasty dent in it.

Caera rolled the rock off the edge. Crack, crack, silence, crash.

"Think it worked?" Jes said, chuckling as she stood up. He held out a hand and gently pushed her back behind the rock wall. "Hey, what the—"

Clang. It'd taken a few seconds, but something had come up, and then come down. Much as Hell or the afterlife didn't seem to follow many rules of biology and whatnot, it did seem to at least care about physics a little. Hopefully enough for breaking a sword.

"Things bounce," he said, which of course earned the biggest rolling of the eyes from the gargoyle. He laughed. Dao did too, some chirps and clicks mixing into the lovely sound.

All four of them gathered around the rock, and David let out a long groan as Caera pushed the big boulder off the hilt. Of course it didn't work the way he'd wanted it to. The blade had broken, but way too close to the grip. Dao clicked sadly a few times as she picked up the top half of the blade, sitting ten feet away, while David stared down at the grip in his hands, and the whole three inches of blade sticking out of it. The blade had broken at an angle, so at least the sword had a point, but the blade was shorter than a dagger, and weighed a good fifteen, maybe twenty pounds.

It was now borderline useless. The blade was just too damn short.

Dao clicked softly as she tossed the blade aside, came up to him, and patted his shoulder.

“Don’t worry about it,” Jes said. “No one’s expecting you to fight any demons, unless it’s an imp or grem. Or maybe an incubus or succubus; they’re not much stronger than humans.”

He threw the grip away into a nearby cliff wall, and it clanked and clunked, a bit louder than was probably a good idea. They were supposed to be hiding out.

“I guess,” he said as he leaned against one of the boulders they’d moved. “The armor is heavy enough. I used to wear a weighted vest when working out, all the time, but it never got easy.”

“You’re tiny,” Caera said, nodding.

“I’m not... tiny.”

“You are so tiny.” With a playful grin, Jes came up to him, and used her good wing to hook him around the back and shoulders. Jes was over a foot taller than him, and Caera was over a foot taller than Jes. He was tiny.

“I am not tiny.”

Dao clicked a few times, came up, pulled him away from Jes with her good arm, and rubbed a horn against the side of his head. The two girls laughed.

Caera got on all fours in front of him and poked him in the stomach with a claw.

“I don’t know how we’re going to kill Diogo and stop Tacitus, or get those Cainite bastards, but it doesn’t involve you wielding a sword and fighting, David. Just focus on staying alive.”

Jes poked at the tiger lady with her tail. “You just want him for your rune reading crap.”

“Yes, I do. Learning about the origins of who we are, why Lucifer created us, what happened to them and the Old Ones, you don’t care about any of that?”

“Nope.” Jes slipped behind David, hugged him, set her chin on his shoulder, and grinned down at Caera. “But I know Dao wants to keep her pet alive. And I know, no matter how much I bitch and complain, Dao won’t be happy until she knows he is.”

David smiled, but didn’t turn around to look at the gargoyle. Instead he gave his smile to Dao, who returned it, leaned in, kissed his cheek, and rubbed her horn on his head some more.

Caera slapped Jes’s tail away. “Unless the two of you want to fuck him again, stop getting all over him. He can’t control the aura, and I can already feel it growing again.”

Jes and Dao laughed. David said nothing. Jes was in a lot better mood now, after having sex again, and he was happy keeping it that way. Maybe she was thinking more clearly now? Maybe sex was how to keep her temper under control? Ha, no way. But whatever it was, she was being a lot nicer than before.

“You girls... You know I’m unbelievably grateful, right? I mean, yes, the sex was amazing and you’re all super hot, but... but I’m in Hell, and you three are the luckiest thing that’s...” Shit, what would Mia say? “The most amazing...” Nah, she wouldn’t say it like that, too corny. “I just... I want to say...”

“Holy shit you suck at this,” Jes said, and she kissed his cheek, right where Dao had kissed it. “Just use your aura and seduce us.”

“Again?”

Dao clicked a few times, hopped in place once on her good leg, and nodded, big grin on her face.

Caera, the voice of reason in their party, shook her head as she stood back up.

“We know you’re thankful, David. But it’s not like we’re helping you for no reason.”

Dao chirped, pushed Jes off him, stood behind him and hugged him instead.

“Okay,” the tiger lady said, rolling her eyes, “at least Jes and I aren’t helping you for no reason. Dao wants to keep you as a pet, fine, but I expect compensation. You’re going to help me kill those Cainite fucks.” Nodding, the tiger lady grabbed the sword hilt he’d tossed, and handed it to him. It was better than nothing, at least.

“Still not really sure how you expect me to do that,” he said. “You just said you don’t expect me to be fighting.”

“Of course not. You’ll be bait.”

He winced. Lovely.

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Dao and Jes were healed enough to walk, but not run. That meant stealth. He’d have preferred they stayed behind, and Caera had said the same thing, but Jes insisted, and her personal goal — killing Diogo — was on the top of the priority list. They had to see the spire.

Saw it they did.

“Holy shit,” David said. The girls crouched behind the rock with him, all four hiding near the base of the mountain. Behind the mountain was their little hideout, and they’d had to climb up a ways to get up to where the ground spread out, the valley opened up, and the great spire became visible.

The spire was a towering behemoth of claws, stone and flesh, with giant balconies that circled it at different levels, each lined with colossal teeth. Hundreds, thousands of feet tall. Imps circled the air, gliding, flowing, along with some gargoyles and some bat-like demon women. Dilojas, according to the girls. The bigger breeds walked the ground, vrats, brutes, tigers, plenty of the gliders too, though the imps and grems preferred to hop and glide from giant spike to giant spike that stuck out of the ground.

That was a lot of corpses and skeletons on those spikes.

“Fucking terrifying,” David whispered.

“Zel’s a scary bitch,” Jes said.

Dao clicked twice.

Caera shook her head. “Better her than letting shit get nasty like in False Gate.”

“And Mia’s in there?” he asked.

Caera nodded. “The demons are buzzing. Excited. Something’s up, and a good bet it’s Mia. No one’s seen an unmarked soul before, let alone one with an aura.”

“And that,” Jes said, pointing out into the valley and a tall-as-fuck brute standing at the spire’s entrance, “is fucking Diogo.”

“That’s Diogo!?” David slapped his hand over his mouth, and hid behind the rock again. They all did. Too loud. “Shit, that’s Diogo? He’s huge!”

Jes nodded, growling quietly as she peeked over the rock again. “Like I said, he became a bailiff because he’s bigger than other brutes, and just barely smart enough to not get stabbed in the back.”

“I could go in there,” Caera said. “He doesn’t know I’m with you guys. Unless someone’s come running from Gorzen Eye to tell them I’m missing, I could walk in there and... convince Diogo to come out?”

“How the fuck you going to do that?” Jes asked. “He’s just delivered an unmarked soul to Zel. She’s probably rewarding him. Free food, lots of sex, the works.”

“Not with Mia, I hope,” he said.

Dao clicked a few times, shaking her head.

“Yeah,” Jes said. “He’s probably trying to fuck Acelina again.”

“Wh—”

“One of the spire mothers.”

Caera and Dao both sighed happily, earning a raised brow from David. When they noticed, all three ladies held out their hands in front of them, cupping nonexistent giant breasts that left them all in the dust.

“Uh...”

Dao giggled, clicked a few times, and patted David on the shoulder before she peeked out again.

“Spire mothers help raise the eggs,” Caera said, “and they help make sure young demons who survive the hatchery get to escape the pit.”

“And get a taste of them, too,” Jes said, nodding and grinning.

Dao clicked excitedly, nodding.

“Eggs? Taste?” How demons were born was just one of the many questions he’d had, and had promptly forgot about when shit hit the fan.

“I’ll explain when we’re safe,” Caera said. “Let’s go up. Better vantage point.”

The four of them scaled the mountain. It wouldn’t be long before the fire sky died down, and the twilight hours began, a bad time to be out and about, but David wanted to make sure he understood everything about the place before they made any kind of plans. Unfortunately, the only plan coming to his head at the moment was to duck and cover, and pray things got better. Maybe someone would hear the prayers?

Probably not.

It was a big valley, surrounded by mountains. None of the mountains were insanely tall, but that didn’t make climbing them any easier. Lots of jagged rocks. Lots of places where a misplaced step meant sliding enough to slice open a calf muscle against a sharp rock, or break a toe. Lots of places where there was no path, just climbing, and David was again super thankful he put in the time to get strong, especially with the armor and the broken sword weighing him down.

But his feet her tough now, fingers too, and he felt comfortable enough holding onto an outcropping of stone to look out and admire the horrible beauty of the valley, the spire, and the spikes

and pillars that circled it. They were too far away for the demons down there to see them as anything more than small blurs against the rocks. It was the only thing that made traveling around Death's Grip even possible, that the dark stone, shades of red, brown, and black, matched the demons' skin and his cloak perfectly.

Higher and higher they climbed, until they stopped on a cliff edge that faced out toward the valley. It was sloped inward toward the mountain, perfect for getting on their stomachs and peeking out over the valley without all the gliders spotting them.

"Eggs," Caera said as she crawled forward, lay on her stomach, and gestured out to the spire in the distance. "Hell lays the eggs."

"Hell?" He lay beside her, and scanned around as best he could. It was getting late, too late.

He couldn't see over the mountains around the valley, except to the counter clockwise direction and the Black Valley. The vortex was visible too, just barely, a tiny little slit in the distance past the spire, past the mountain behind it, hundreds, maybe thousands of kilometers away. Death's Grip supposedly had the tallest mountains, but climbing the tallest mountain just to get a peek of everything was at the bottom of the list of things he wanted to do right now.

"In the spire," Caera said. "There's a place where eggs are laid by Hell and her flesh. Spire mothers take care of them, hatch them, put them in the pits, and whoever survives the pits until adulthood gets to leave."

"Whoever... survives."

Dao lay beside him, and clicked a few times.

Jay lay beside Dao, opposite of him. "Yeah, it's pretty rough. But after about a year, and a dozen or so kills, you're free."

"Wait. Demons are locked up in this pit place, for a year? And you kill... and eat each other?"

Caera nodded. "It's a big pit, lots of tunnels and caves. And sometimes the spire mothers will throw down some fresh meat for us, some souls to eat. But, yeah."

Information overload. Hell laid eggs, herself. Some apparently busy demons called spire mothers helped hatch the eggs. Then they put them in something called 'the pit' until they were mature enough to leave, which was apparently around a year. And Jes said earlier something about 'getting a taste'. So many questions.

“Okay,” he said, “so, lots of balconies on the outside. Demons gliding down to lower balconies. How do they get up?”

“Balconies on the inside,” Jes said. “A lot more, with a big hole in the center of the tower, all the way up, all the way down. There’s stairs, too, but demons just jump.”

“No wonder you all have such amazing legs.”

All three girls chuckled. Wow, he managed a decent compliment in the flow of a conversation. Mia would have been proud.

“The hole goes deep into the ground, too,” Caera said. “As deep as the spire is tall.”

“Jesus.”

Jes nodded, outstretched her wing over Dao, and poked David in the shoulder with her thumb claw.

“Zel has a lot of rooms she likes to live in, sleep in, fuck in, and collect her trophies and jewelry in. Mia’s probably in one of those rooms, higher up.”

“Upstairs then,” he said. “You don’t think Zel will lock her up in a dungeon or something?” Or worse.

“Nah,” Jes said. “Zel can be a cruel bitch sometimes, but she prefers playing games and having fun with her pets. She’ll want Mia’s cooperation.”

“And if Mia doesn’t give it to her?”

“Then she’ll torture the fuck out of her and make her wish she was dead.”

His stomach flipped, but Dao rubbed her horns against his shoulder and chirped a few times.

“Dao’s right,” Caera said. “Zel plays the long game. She won’t resort to torture unless she has to.”

David gestured out to the valley below. “And all the corpses I’m seeing on spikes?”

“Zel makes examples out of demons — and souls — who step out of line,” Jes said. “If they’re on a spike, they probably deserve it.”

“Probably,” Caera said, “but... not always.”

Before David could groan, Dao poked him in the shoulder, and gestured to the side, away from the valley, and toward one of the nearby mountains. With a few quiet clicks, she inched back from the edge of the cliff, pressed her body against the mountain wall, and again nodded toward the other cliff.

David stared at it, and waited. Sure enough, a shadow shifted. Death's Grip was nothing but solid rock, and any shifting shadows were mild and sporadic, cast by the flickering flames of burning bushes, or the sky of fire and its ambient waves of light. No shadows just 'shifted' unless whatever they were attached to was alive and moving.

Caera, Jes, and David followed after Dao. David nudged Caera, pointed at his eyes, then up at the distant cliff edge with the shadow, and then at her. It took her a second, but nodded, and climbed. She was the better climber, and every motion she made was a perfect prowl, claws navigating the stones immaculately. The rest of them followed whatever path she took, knowing it'd be the best path with the least chance of making noise, or falling and breaking a limb.

What Caera had said about Kia and Marquez weighed heavier on David with each moment. The tiger lady really was used to having companions she took care of, and every motion she made, she did making sure it'd be a good path for the people following her to take. She was good at taking point. She was used to being a leader and taking care of her friends.

It took a bit of time, but she got them up to another flat area with a lip they could lay on and look out over the other mountain with the suspicious shadow. Even better, there was enough space between them and the distant mountain they could whisper to each other without risk of being heard. Probably.

"What... the fuck is that?" David asked.

There was a goort. He'd seen some goorts, big scary horse-like creatures, but this goort was enormous, bigger than a work horse, and completely black. Even scarier was it had armor, slabs of bronze metal crafted and shaped to perfectly fit the giant creature's thick musculature. War horses from human history would have been jealous of its bronze armor, the red gradients in it, the gold engravings of demon skulls, and the silver horns that came out of it.

That wasn't the typical meera metal armor David had seen. This was aera metal, the special stuff Caera told him about. And the person on the horse was covered in it.

"The rider." Caera's voice was a whisper, but it trembled, and her eyes were wider than he'd ever seen them. David looked past her to Dao and Jes, and found the both of them shivering, Jes's eyes just as wide.

They were beyond terrified. They were frozen solid.

The rider, whoever that was, was decked in enough armor he — probably a he from the shape — would have killed a normal horse riding it. Full plate, head to toe, and just as ornate as the goort they rode. Bronze and red, with gold lining the edges, and gold embossed skulls all over. They clutched the



reins of the mount with gauntlets, and did not move, their classic medieval helmet pointed straight toward the spire. Two silver horns stuck out from the helmet's sides upward, and while David couldn't see the rider's face from the side, the shape of the helmet told him there'd be a T slit for a visor, or maybe just two eye slits like on a great helm.

So much armor, with enough bulk the rider barely looked human, and could have walked out of some absurd, violent fantasy story. All that was missing was a cape. The rider had two huge axes hooked onto his back, just as ornate as the rest of the armor, with silver blades that had amber lines cutting through them, like veins.

"Who's the rider?" he asked, and made doubly sure his voice was the quietest whisper possible.

Caera spoke first, voice still trembling. "No one knows. I hear stories about him, and how he shows up... randomly. There's no runes about him anywhere that say anything useful, but I heard he got into a fight with the Damall in the Grave Valley a few decades ago. There's a story about him being in Angel's Spine a century before then."

"All I know," Jes said, "is every story about the rider includes demons getting slaughtered. If he's here..." Slowly, she looked David's way. Caera and Dao did the same.

"Fuck." He hit the stones underneath them with his forehead. "Here for me, right? Me, or Mia."

They all looked back to the rider, and waited. But the goort and the rider did not move. With all the armor, it was impossible to tell if the rider even breathed.

"Let's go," Caera said. "We can't—"

More movement cut through the silence, hooves and talons on stone, and the four of them froze stiff. It was sheer luck the sound didn't come from above them.

An enormous pair of red and black wings rose up from around one of the curves of the mountain, coming the rider's way. Before the bearer stepped into view, other demons jumped up first, a couple vrats, one tiger, one gargoyle, and two big brutes. All of them were tiny compared to the demon with the wings.

A tetrad demon, a korgejin. He flapped his wings once, hard, and used the blast of air to help his jump send him high before he came crashing down, straight onto the rider's position. A colossal beast, bigger than Caera, bigger than Diogo, he slammed into the ground on his hooves, and the mountains echoed with the harsh clang of his black sword striking the stone.

The rider and his goort dodged the sword with a small sidestep, leaving the giant demon landing and hitting nothing but the rough stone of the mountain. The area was mostly flat, enough for the demons to run around and surround the rider, but it didn't look like it'd be easy as that. The rider hopped off the horse, and landed hard, metal armor clanking with heavy thuds that announced how weighty the armor was. He drew his axes, turned, and faced the half dozen smaller demons that circled him.

"Zel will reward me," the winged tetrad said, growling as he bared his fangs at the rider, "when I present her your heart, and your head."

The rider said nothing. The new angle let David see the rider's front, the beautiful engravings and embossed gold skulls on the bronze and red, and how the helmet was actually shaped like a skull. It did have a T slit visor, but no light penetrated it, hiding the owner's face in complete shadow.

Whoever he was, whatever he was, he stood there, both axes in hand half raised out to his sides. It was a very human posture, standing up perfectly straight, but whoever wore the armor had to be at least seven feet tall.

"Gorlus," Caera whispered, "one of Zel's right hands."

"Gorlus." David gulped as he nodded. The giant demon, wrapped in black armor and wielding a giant black sword, all so much bigger than the rider, seemed so small in comparison.

"Your heart, for Zelandariel!" one of the other demons yelled. "She'll reward us. She will."

"Reward us!"

"Reward us!"

Gorlus spread his wings, lifted his sword to his mouth, and ran his long tongue along the massive blade, before pointing it at the rider.

"You shouldn't have come here, rider. Zel will be surprised and delighted, and I will taste of your soul."

Caera growled quietly in her throat, shook her head, and leaned in toward David.

"He didn't tell Zel he was going to do this. He's risking his life so he can surprise her."

"Or take the rider's heart for himself," Jes said. "Zel's changed ever since this guy got into her life, him and Saldavin. Fuck him."

David didn't say anything. He couldn't look away from the violence.

The rider ran forward. Maybe if he'd had a spear or a sword and shield, he'd have taken a defensive position, but two axes? David shrank into the stone, and watched, mesmerized, eyes locked onto the armored figure as he ran into the demons.

The demons ran straight back into him. Did they think their demon strength would work? Their size and mass? Or maybe they just wanted violence without a care for whether they lived or died? Whoever the rider was, he was smart enough to take advantage.

The rider ducked under the vrat's sword, and sank his right axe into the demon's stomach. Even from so far away, David heard the impact of the axe getting the demon just underneath the slab of black armor covering only a portion of their chest. And as he yanked the axe out of the vrat's guts, he slammed the left axe down onto the skull of the tiger who jumped straight at him. The tiger hit the ground almost as hard as the rock Caera had dropped earlier. Blood splattered.

The gargoyle and other vrat leapt for him from behind, and both got their claws onto the rider's armor. They were heavy demons, but the rider turned around without issue, and again sank his axes into their bodies with all the finesse of a lumberjack angry with a particularly stubborn tree. They died instantly, each getting the axe in the skull, and through it, down to the jaw.

Gorlus was right behind them. How could something that big move so fast? A ten-foot-tall beast on hooves, with wings spread and giant sword in hand, he half jumped half swooped toward the rider again. The rider couldn't dodge the sword this time, and the huge blade hit him in the side. The black blade sang with impact and vibration, and the clank sound echoed through the mountains as the rider fell. The blade had not pierced the armor.

"This is quite the disappointment," Gorlus said, slowly stomping after his prey, his two brutes circling the rider. "You show up again after all these years? I haven't forgotten what you did to me last time."

David looked Caera's way, but she shrugged and watched.

Gorlus and his two remaining demons laughed as the titans closed the distance.

"What's the matter, rider? Old age wearing you down?"

The rider said nothing. He didn't need to. The mount he rode turned, and without a neigh or click, charged. Only the clop clop of its hooves warned Gorlus the goort was coming, and he turned to face the horse-like creature.

Mistake. The rider got up to their armored feet as if they weighed nothing, jumped high into the air, and without a single grunt or scream, he slashed both his axes down toward Gorlus's back. The huge

demon managed to turn around again to face the rider, but that left him open to the goort again. The giant horse crashed into the tetrad's back, and sank its horns into flesh.

Gorlus roared in pain and fury, but it ended with a squelch and crunch, as the rider sank both axes down onto the demon's face. With the demon facing David's direction, the rider blocked his view, but when the rider fell and landed on their feet and knee with a booming thud, David and his protectors all gasped.

Gorlus was dead, and the mess of torn flesh, skin, and shattered bones that were once his face, were on fire. David forced his gaze onto the other demons the rider had killed. Where he'd struck them, their flesh and armor were on fire, too.

The rider, still silent, slowly got up off their knee onto both feet again, and with the same unhurried, monolithic motion, turned to face the two brutes.