

~~Mia~~

“I don’t want to help her.”

Sighing, Adron shook his head and gestured to her.

“You sure?”

She sat on her pile of blankets, while Adron stood by her closed teeth door, Kas beside him crouched in his corner. Hannah was nowhere to be found, kept safe in Adron’s guest room. Zel liked him, so he got to have a guest room. Hopefully that didn’t mean he liked her back enough to betray Mia and tell her what Mia was telling him right now. Not that Zel would care all that much if she found out Mia didn’t want to help her. But, maybe she would. Mia was now on thin ice.

Kas clicked once, but said nothing. Far as she could tell from his body language, he wasn’t happy about the situation, but that could have meant anything. For all Mia knew, Kas actually really liked Zel, and would do anything to make her happy. Acelina did.

“I’m... I don’t know.” Mia hugged her knees to her chest. “The way she threatened me, I...” She put her forehead to her knees. The way Zel had threatened her had been terrifying, and Mia had read enough about this sort of thing to recognize the cold, harsh shift of context. She’d known Zel was a ruthless tyrant, but she hadn’t really been able to appreciate it. Seeing what Zel did to Vinicius the second time, literally stabbing him, and then looking at Mia with obvious ‘I could do this to you, too’ eyes had been an ice bath for her brain.

Now, she couldn’t stop picturing herself chained to the wall, being tortured, skewered, screaming in pain, and...

Kas rumbled a little, moved slightly in her direction, stopped, and resumed his crouched position.

Adron, on the other hand, came over and squatted in front of her.

“This shit really hits you hard, doesn’t it?”

“What?”

“The... bad stuff.” He gestured around vaguely. “Torture, death, things like that.”

“Of course it hits me hard! I...” She eyed the demon, his two big black horns, his demony face, before she sighed and planted her forehead on her knees again. “It’s not like that with other souls, is it?”

“Nope.”

And she knew why, too. He was about to say it, too, but didn't. He didn't need to.

Was Hannah like that? Just emotionally dumb or blind to other people's pain? Didn't put herself in other people's shoes? Mia couldn't stop putting herself in other people's shoes. If someone else hurt, then she hurt. It was part of why she got into psychology.

Christ, what she'd do to be back in class, reading about simple little studies about why girls with absent fathers become strippers, why boys with pampering mothers have screwed up perceptions of romance, and why kids who grow up alone have attachment issues. And then of course reading about counter examples. She loved reading about that stuff, trying to figure out where it made sense, where it didn't, and then having her perceptions flipped upside down by the professor. She loved trying to figure out why she was the way she was, did the things she did, felt the things she felt. Growing up an orphan, bouncing from guardian to guardian, of course she wanted to figure out more about herself.

So much for all that. Now she was in Hell, surrounded by fellow souls who belonged there unlike her, and demons who lived on violence and sex, and literally ate human hearts. Her soft heart was going to get her killed. Like maybe David had been. Much as her brother could be pretty robotic on the outside, she knew he was just as sensitive as she was on the inside. Maybe...

Sighing, she shook her head. "I don't want to help her control Vinicius."

"I told you about him, Mia," Adron said. "He was a raging monster. Think Kas." With one of his playful grins, the vratorin gestured back to the sarkarin. "Except enormous, and constantly bloodthirsty, slaughtering and killing everything he can get his hands on. You're really worried about his feelings?"

"It's more than that. Zel's... I can't... I don't know if I can do what she wants. She wants me to be this tool of control, I can't do that without getting into the mindset for it, and I can't do that! I try, and... I just..." The sounds of Vinicius screaming in pain, the sight of a titan panting and groaning with exhaustion and misery, she couldn't wipe them from her mind. The memory was like someone pulling a blanket out from underneath her. Tapping into the aura Zel wanted her to craft was not easy.

After a few seconds of silence, Kas took a couple steps closer.

"Zel won't kill you without reason," he said.

"I know. I'm less worried about dying than I am being tortured. And..." And of Vinicius getting tortured.

Adron and Kas traded glances. After another short, eternal silence, Adron reached down, took her hand, and helped her up to her feet.

“Zel is a crafty bitch, Mia. She’s not some movie villain. If you’re struggling to do what she wants, and torturing you won’t help, she won’t do it. Just talk with her, work with her, and everything will work out.”

It was a struggle to not roll her eyes at Adron and his casual use of words like ‘movie’. Adron was right, but having things ‘work out’ was the exact thing Mia wanted to avoid. Working out meant Mia, on a literal leash at Zel’s side like a pet, working with her and her spire tools to break demons. Even if the demons deserved it, or worse, Mia did not want to be the person doling out that punishment. She couldn’t be.

And a little voice in her head was convinced Zel would love to takeover every spire, attack Heaven, and turn the whole world into her own personal buffet. Mia didn’t want to be a part of that, either. But, it was mostly the doing the bad stuff herself and seeing it all first-hand that terrified her. The scene in *The Green Mile*, that last scene with Tom Hanks and Michael Duncan, she still had nightmares about it sometimes, except it was her wearing the officer’s uniform.

“You really believe in Zel, don’t you?” she asked, eyes drifting down.

“Believe?”

“Believe. Like, she’s your leader, and you’ll do what she wants because you believe in her cause?”

Adron raised a black brow. Much as he tried to hide it, she saw the hesitation plain as day.

“Believe is a strong word, but Zel’s power and wit can’t be ignored. She took this tower in the chaos after the Spires War. She stopped Vinicius. She fought against Alessio. She...” He shrugged. Much as he wanted to sound convincing, the conviction drained from his tone. “She’s the ruler of Death’s Grip for a reason.”

Mia squinted back up at him. “It doesn’t sound like you believe in her, just that you fear her.”

After a long, heavy sigh, Adron nodded. “Yeap, that’s pretty much what it is.”

Kas came a little closer, clucked once deep in his throat, and shook his head as he gestured to Adron and Mia with his big tail.

“Fear and respect. What else would a demon want?”

“Oh I don’t know, trust!?” She threw up her hands, marched up to Kas, and pointed straight at his snout. “I’d like to trust the person I’m serving? Trust that they’ll do the right thing? Trust that they won’t betray me? Trust...”

Even without eyes, she could see Kas's facial expression well enough, subtle shifts in his shark dragon snout. He didn't understand why she'd need that, even after their talk.

She clenched her hands into fists and forced down the urge to punch his big scary sharp jaw.

"I don't want to help her."

"You don't have much of a choice," Adron said. He stepped past her and stopped at her door. It was closed, and he wasn't going anywhere unless she opened it for him. "I'll try and play damage control with Zel, but I'm not gonna lie, Mia. I'm siding with Zel. I always side with Zel, because she's the big bad and she's earned the right to be the big bad. You can even find statues of her, ones Hell grew, because Hell recognizes Zel's power and influence. And, much as I know you hate this idea, Zel isn't all that bad compared to a lot of the other spire rulers."

Mia shivered and hugged herself.

"And Alessio?"

Alessio, another tetrad like Zel, was the ruler of the province counter-clockwise from Death's Grip, some place called the Black Valley. Clockwise was the Grave Valley, run by Azailia, another tetrad. Part of Mia wanted to feel kind of proud that the province she was in and its sisters were run by women — or at least women-like demons — but not if they were all evil bitches like Zel.

Adron looked Kas's way. Kas did nothing for a couple moments before shrugging and rubbing a claw on one of his horns, like an angry man picking his fingernails with a big knife.

"She's different," Kas said.

"Different. Well thanks for the detailed explanation!"

Adron shook his head as he squatted down in front of her.

"Mia, what we're trying to say is—"

"This is Hell and Zel is a better option than the others?"

Again the two boys looked between each other and back to her.

Kas spoke first. "He—"

"The fact there's worse options doesn't mean this option is a good option! That's not how that works!" David's words came flying out of her mouth before she could stop them. "That's not logical! You don't just take all the options and draw a line in the middle and call that a reasonable compromise! You use other things, other points as your reference, and... and..." Okay, she wasn't David, and the

exact details of the logic fallacies escaped her. But she could still understand it! “I’m not going to just accept this situation because it’s better than the alternative. I won’t accept it! I’m...”

Another heavy silence fell on them. It was cliché at this point, heavy silences, the inescapable reality that she was in Hell. She wanted to fix her situation, fix the problems, save herself, save her brother, even save the remnants. But she couldn’t. Adron and Kas knew she wanted to, and they knew she couldn’t. So no one said a thing.

It wasn’t long before Zel showed up.

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“We will try again,” Zel said, voice solid and cold.

“I’m...”

Zel, standing beside the bound Vinicius, gestured to the beast with one of her metal rods.

“You crafted the aura yesterday, weak as it was. With practice you will craft stronger.”

Mia wasn’t entirely sure of that. She’d learned how to suppress the aura a bit, and craft some nuanced ones, but Zel wanted power. The only way to make her new boss... master happy, was to push out an overpowering aura of control that would make Vinicius succumb to the spire tools Zel had brought. Mia just wasn’t that sort of person, and she knew it.

Supposedly, if Zel could get the tools to work, she wouldn’t need Mia putting out the aura. The spire could summon a horde, make all demons in the area come to the spire and pick a target to kill, where Zel could then use the tools to brand the demons and seal the spire’s command deep into them. That would force them to give into the horde, like a riot group getting taken up in the chaos and going on a mindless rampage, all guided toward her goal. It was less waging war, and more summoning the swarm to destroy and devour.

Mia was tempted to ask if Zel had actually ever broken a demon to serve her on a demon-to-demon level. The horde was one thing. Mind breaking a single demon into a servant was another thing entirely.

She gave into the temptation.

“Will that tool really allow you to break him completely? ‘Cause, I mean, on the surface you could break a wild horse, or a violent dog, and zoos used to... still do, break animals to be a part their act. But that’s all psychology stuff, and sometimes animals snap and kill their owners.” Deservedly so in some of those cases.

With an almost motherly sigh, Zel nodded as she stood in front of Vinicius and placed her back against his chest. She had a couple spikes back there, not big ones like the bound monster, but enough Vinicius probably had to be careful with how he breathed. The hole in his gut was mostly healed over, but the flesh looked soft, red, and easy to tear. It wouldn’t be long before Zel ripped it open, knowing her.

“There in lies the joy of the leash.” Zel gestured to the small chain on the other wall, and its glowing amber stone similar to Mia’s necklace. “I crafted it using the spire, with what knowledge I had of Valzanal’s methods. The spire can create auras, more complex than a demon’s sin aura but not nearly complex enough to accomplish a nuanced goal. Valzanal wanted to overcome that issue, and so do I.”

Oh sweet jesus Zel wanted to brainwash the world, Hell, Heaven, all of it probably, and enslave it. Adron said she wasn’t a movie villain, but the tone in her voice said otherwise. Maybe Mia’s second bodyguard didn’t know his master as well as he thought.

“That’s...”

“Valzanal did like to plan for grand, worthy goals. From her experiments, I learned to craft the binding leash, and while it cannot impose an aura upon the demon bound to it, it can sense intent.”

“Sense intent?”

Grinning, Zel fetched the small chain, stood beside Vinicius again, and dangled it in front of his face. She had to raise her hand high to reach it.

“When I wear this, whoever it is bound to will suffer its wrath if they attempt to harm me.”

“Oh. Wow. Really?” That did actually sound pretty amazing.

“Indeed.”

“That’s...” Frowning, Mia looked down and scratched her head. “I’m noticing that a lot of stuff in Hell is about that. About... emotions, intent, and desires, and... and...”

With a satisfied chuckle, Zel put the small chain back, and squatted down in front of Mia with Vinicius behind her.

“It is sometimes easy to forget that Hell, for all its visceral realness, is not the same as the surface, is it? There are no atoms here. No matter. No true science to explain how things interact. That is the domain of the surface. But here in the afterlife, it is a world of essence and resonance, of the fabric of the afterlife that weaves together and forms the foundation the surface sits upon. A world of emotion, of ghosts given form, of intent and sin and...” Something stopped her, something that made her groan and roll her eyes. “Intent is a powerful thing, in a true sense here in the afterlife. I do not know what bricks God used to build this Great Tower, this... Forlorn Tower, but they give the depths of our will true value and meaning.”

Damn. Zel really could pull off the philosopher speech when she wanted to. How could someone as violent as her think like that? If Zel taught a course, Mia would have loved to have taken one of her classes, just to listen to her talk about life and stuff.

“True value?” Mia said. “It’s not like that on the surface. Lots of people up there have the best intentions and see nothing for it but pain. Life isn’t fair up there.”

“Correct. On the surface, it is different. Your intentions and desires, your will, they draw in resonance, but they do little to shape the world around you on the surface. It sculpts and molds your soul instead, and if the Great Tower finds your soul saturated with resonance of a vile nature, you are sent to us, to be tortured and purified.”

“You... know that, for sure?”

Shaking her head, Zel stood back up, and half turned to face Vinicius again.

“Alas, I do not. I repeat the old stories, and who knows how true they are. But regardless, you cannot deny the nature of your new life is different than the last. Surely you felt that, when you tasted that demon’s heart.”

Damn it, Adron. Stop telling your boss everything.

“I... did.” She braced for questions about the images she saw.

“Then you understand that your ghostly body now does not sustain on food, but on essence, the lifeblood of this world. It is why it takes human souls months to die of starvation, if they are not injured, without a drop to drink. It is why humans are sent here, to be the first link in the food chain. It is why Adron and Kas can fill you with enough flesh to break a woman, and yet you survive, and climax a dozen times over.” If the woman had said that with a more flirtatious tone, Mia would have instantly devolved into sexy thoughts, but Zel was in full queenly speech mode. “The rules are different. You must learn to navigate them. I must learn to control them.”

Because she wanted to rule the fucking universe, she just didn't want to say it so bluntly.

No questions about the memories Mia saw, though, when she'd eaten the demon heart. Interesting.

“Once I break the beast, I will wear the chain to be safe from any potential harm he may attempt, and enforce my will.” She casually rotated one of the metal rods she carried, the staff-like one with amber on the end, but not spikes or prongs on its tip like the others. “And if something goes awry, I will craft new tools to push him further.”

Mia tilted her head. Unless she was misreading Zel, and that was a pretty big chance considering Zel's smooth, alien visage, its subtle nose and mask-like qualities, but it did seem like Zel wasn't just describing her plan for Mia. She was testing the waters to see if Mia had a counter-point, or maybe, saying things out loud to see if they sounded possible even to herself. For all Zel's confidence and intelligence, maybe she wasn't actually sure what she was attempting was even possible.

“Have you tried breaking a, uh, weaker demon?”

“I have. They have a habit of dying before Valzanal's rod takes root.”

Fucking god. Mia looked up at Vinicius long enough for the dragon monster to meet her gaze. She had to look away. He'd gone through pain as Zel's prisoner, and more pain resisting her attempts to break him with Valzanal's weird spire tools. He didn't express it anymore than a stone could express the pain of a hundred million years of an ocean tide crashing against it. He didn't have to, she could see the wear and tear.

Remember Mia, he's a murdering monster of rage and chaos, someone who went berserk and didn't stop until they'd made a bridge with the bodies of their victims. Stop feeling bad for him. Think of David. What would he say? He'd say 'put up a wall, and just do things by the numbers'.

Easier said than done, when looking at a beast bound to a wall by a dozen chains, tortured, starved, and everything between.

“With time, when your aura is strong enough, perhaps you could ensnare lesser demons to your cause, hmm?” Zel winked at her and licked a fang. “The imps and grems are frustrating for their ability to resist the call of the spire. Perhaps you could control them, and launch your own wars?”

“Imps and grems can resist the spire?”

“Resist is perhaps the incorrect word. They are the simplest of demons, and their minds lack the... hooks, needed for the spire to latch onto them sufficiently. Imagine shifting snow to build a fortress, or

throw at an enemy, but the imps and grems are snowflakes still upon the air, moving aside as you try to snatch them from the breeze.” Even Zel watched the scrying pools enough to know how snow behaved.

Impas, impins, gremlas, and gremlins, sometimes cute, always scary, little men and women demons about four feet tall, gliding around snacking on dead demons and dead humans. Scavengers, surviving on trace bits of resonance found in parts of the body not the heart, according to Adron. Being able to control them would be like controlling a swarm of locusts, there were so many of them.

“You think I can do that?”

“If you can, you would be a great threat to me.”

“Oh... um...”

“Which is why I have you here, now, in my grasp, the same as Vinicius. You shall be my pet, and you shall serve me well. If you ignore my orders, I will torture you. If you try and usurp me, I will do more than that, as I would with Vinicius once he is broken. But it won’t come to that, will it?” With an almost sexual motion, she leaned her side into Vinicius’s chest as she looked down at Mia. She held a smile, steady, almost inviting. “And, after yesterday, I realize that direct force will not work well with you. Perhaps, as souls would say, a carrot would work better? Do as I command and I will make sure your endless sexual desires are well satisfied. Kasimiro, Adron, Saldavin. Or perhaps you would like to take me up on my original suggestion? You and I, with Vinicius? Your body, in my hands, slowly lowered onto one of this gorgeous beast’s lengths?”

Okay Mia, think, analyze. Was Zel trying to get back on Mia’s good side because she realized she had to, to get Mia’s brain working the way she wanted? Yes, certainly, but was she actually in a good mood, or was it an act, and she was one second away from eviscerating Mia and making her eat her own guts? Down here in Hell, Mia could probably survive that, and she very much didn’t want to know what her afterlife guts tasted like. She didn’t want to die either, and learn if she’d become the first unmarked remnant, go straight to the Great Tower or whatever, and... any of that.

Hearing a demon call her sexual desires ‘endless’ was also a strange thing. Demons fucked all the time. All the time! They had bigger sex drives than her, surely. Ugh, she could already hear David say something dumb like ‘denial is not just a river in Egypt’. Well, he was a hypocrite, because he was just as bad as her, and the only reason he didn’t spend six hours a day jerking off was he had a refractory period!

“I uh... I think I’m pretty satisfied in that department, you know? Adron and Kas, they... know what they’re doing.” Those two assholes had taken her virginity. She still wasn’t sure how to feel about that. Should she feel anything at all?

“And yet you cannot go five feet without that strange aura of yours tingling with sexual desire.”

Damn it. Mia blushed and squirmed. One minute, Zel was threatening to torture her, the next she was making Mia wriggle with embarrassment. How the hell was Mia supposed to tell if Zel was the evil, horrible bitch she thought, and lying to Mia about everything, or if Zel was actually maybe, kinda, a little bit nice, and trying to find a compromise with Mia?

She met eyes with Vinicius again. He stared down at her, made the tiniest nod he could toward the bolstara tetrad, and a heavy, quiet, sad rumble vibrated through him into the floor.

Loud and clear. Don’t trust Zel.

Slowly, Mia set eyes on the rod in Zel’s hands as the demon queen turned and faced Vinicius with a raised, confused eyebrow. Her plan was to control Vinicius using those rods. Maybe she’d risk it and try to use it on Mia, too, and risk Mia dying? Whatever she was going to do, Vinicius risked another look down to Mia, and shook his head again.

Zel stabbed him. Another scream poured out of his body, and Mia squeaked and looked away, but not fast enough to avoid seeing Zel sink the jagged-tipped rod with the spikes through Vinicius’s soft flesh where she’d stabbed him yesterday. Blood gushed from the wound, splashed over Zel, the rod, and the floor. Getting stabbed by a piece of metal probably barely warranted a grunt to a creature like Vinicius, but the rod did something to him that had him shaking from head to tail, and roaring and screaming through his closed mouth.

“Stop!” Mia screamed. “Please, stop!”

Zel slowly looked down at her, eyes hard, playful gaze gone yet again and replaced with something harder, colder, and meaner. Uh oh.

“He is a mindless brute, and engine of destruction, little soul. Nothing more. Do not pity this creature. He has slaughtered far more souls than I ever have.”

“I... I know, just... please, I can’t try and make the aura if I see him like that.”

With a heavy grunt, Zel yanked the rod out of the beast’s gut. Bits of flesh came out with the spikes, and more blood splattered against the walls as she whipped it clean.

“Empathy. You will have to forgive me, young soul, if I am not familiar with it.”

“Demons don’t feel empathy?”

“Of course we can. But who would choose to be so limited?” Shrugging, she licked some blood off the rod, and her long tongue slid between the spikes with familiarity. “Now, we have wasted enough time. No more talk of sex, or Hell. For now we will focus on building your aura.”

Mia forced herself to nod, and looked up at the bleeding demon. Valzanal’s rod put him through pain Mia couldn’t even begin to imagine, and seeing a beast of a creature that big and tough and strong, hurt that much, made her nauseous.

“I... I’ll try again.”

Zel eyed her, and showed just the tiniest hint of her jaw muscle clenching.

“See that you do.”

Nodding, Mia looked for the strings inside her. The more she got used to looking for them, the better she got at feeling them, like learning to flex a muscle she didn’t know she had. The strings weren’t a part of her, they passed through her, and something inside her could find them, touch them, and pluck them. She’d tried to visualize them a lot more yesterday, and with progress, she got better at finding them. Not necessarily using them, but at least finding them, instead of aimlessly wandering through her own thoughts and imagination, like walking through fog in a dream.

Whatever weird mystical fingers she had inside her that could pluck the invisible strings around her, they did their own thing if she got aroused. But right now, the last thing on her mind was sex.

She looked down. Better she didn’t look at the gaping wound in the monster’s stomach, or the hard look in his dragon eyes. Better she remember what Zel and Adron told her about Vinicius, that he was a killer, a demon who went berserk and slaughtered everyone without a second thought. Better she imagine herself wielding the leash of such a creature, wielding him like a tool, instead. Like, maybe, a princess, with her well trained dog?

Mia would never treat a dog like a slave, though. She’d love her dog, if she’d had one, love him and hug him and pet him and take care of him.

Zel growled. “Begin.” Again the demon’s jaw clenched. Her patience had run out.

“I’m trying. I—”

Zel snapped up straight, and Mia jumped back from her with a squeak, prepared to block an incoming rod. But Zel didn’t raise her weapons, or even look Mia’s way. Slowly, she looked up at the metal ceiling and around at the metal walls, and motioned with her one free hand for Mia to quiet down.

Mia gulped down hard, and looked back to Vinicius, only to find him doing the same thing as Zel. He stopped breathing, and the room went dead silent as the three of them listened.

Thump. A quiet, bassy noise so deep Mia felt it more than heard it, subtle enough Mia's own heartbeat felt harder. Mia opened her mouth, but Zel shot her a glare quick and sharp, and stabbed Mia through the face hard enough Mia almost fell over. Sure enough, as Mia stood there frozen under Zel's angry glare, another thump softly vibrated the metal around them. And then another.

"Stay here and continue."

"W-What? I—"

Again, Zel stabbed her with her icy red glare.

"Stay here, and continue your work, little soul. And when I return, I expect to feel that aura of control, weak as it may be. If I again find you succumbing to your sexual urges, I will. Punish. You. Understood?"

"U-Understood."

Zel was being nice with her words, but not with her eyes. Punish did not do justice what she meant.

She stormed off with her three rods, and closed the big metal doors behind her, again leaving Mia alone with the giant four-armed dragon demon.

"Okay," Mia said. "Okay. This time, I'm going to focus. I'm going to create this control aura, and... and..." Punish. Zel was going to punish her. She'd said it so matter-of-factly, while her eyes had said a million things more, and images of evisceration ran through Mia's mind. Zel apparently had a fondness for stabbing people in the gut, where they were most vulnerable. Then again, she also had a thing for skewering people on spikes, up the crotch and out the mouth. And the better Mia got at understanding Zel, at understanding how her twisted, devious mind worked, the more Mia was convinced Zel enjoyed torture more than the demon queen let on.

The dialog, the offer of reward, of a carrot, it'd been an act. She wanted to hurt Mia, and the only reason she hadn't was because Mia was useful to her, for now.

Sighing, Mia brought up the runes in her mind again, the strange ones her brain couldn't wrap around, and the ones it could. What was the one her mind knew as the battle rune, weapons and armor? Batlam? Zel said runes had power, and she'd also said the angels used that one in battle. Maybe it could help her?

She brought the symbol up in her mind, and... nothing. The same as before.

Was there a rune for control? No, didn't seem to be. What about the rune for aura? Yes, that one existed, but summoning it into her mind did nothing, either. A part of her had hoped the demon heart she'd eaten would have suddenly given her super powers, or the ability to use the runes, anything. Nope.

Stop stalling!

She reached down into herself, found the new muscle she could control, and plucked at the strings of whatever it was around her she was able to touch. Nothing. Right, she had to feel the thing she was trying to create, or plucking the strings did nothing. More like, her hidden fingers passed through the invisible strings, without actually plucking them.

She needed to get into the mood, the right frame of mind. A queen giving orders, controlling her soldiers, ruling a kingdom. A princess, being doted on by servants. An empress, ruling an empire.

A young girl, barely a woman, being ripped open by her master for not being able to do what she wanted.

"Fuck!" Mia threw up her hands and stomped around, before hugging herself and clutching her silk tight to her body. Silk Zel had given her, while all the other humans in the spire went around naked. Even from the start, Zel had been trying to convince Mia that the demon queen was nicer than she really was. Nice, by demon standards, at least. Nice enough she didn't seem like the sort who'd hang Mia upside down from the ceiling, slit her throat, and literally bath in the blood shower.

Zel's mask had started to crack. She was that kind of demon.

"Vinicius," she said, "will Zel... hurt me, if I don't do what she wants soon? I mean, she's already threatened me, I get that, but she also made it clear she's not going to torture me unless she has to. But now... now I think she's been lying to me, and trying to give me a false impression, you know? The way she worships Valzanal..." Mia grabbed her hair and pulled on it. "Oh god, if I can't do what she wants, she's going to use those rods on me and somehow make me do it, isn't it? Or maybe she'll just torture me the normal way like she does all the other demons!" She gestured to the door, and the dungeon beyond. "She'll risk killing me, so she can make me do what she wants, and... and..."

With a heavy head, she looked up at the giant demon. He was looking up at the ceiling in thought, or maybe listening for more of that deep thumping, but he looked back down at her, and slowly nodded once again.

“Fuck. Double fuck. I mean, I knew... and she even told me... but I just... I thought she’d keep me as her pet like she said, and... and...”

Vinicius rumbled.

“I know! I know, okay, I know I was just deluding myself. I thought I was safe, sorta, and that Zel would keep me alive or some shit. Kas and Adron thought so, too! I thought...” She threw up her hands. “She’s going to torture me if I can’t help her until I can, kill me if that doesn’t work, and even if I do help her, she’s going to kill me the moment I’ve done what she wants, isn’t she? Kill me and eat my heart to see if she gets my power or something!” She didn’t bother waiting for Vinicius’s response. She paced around in a circle, clutching her cheeks. “Oh god I’ve been helping her all this time, convinced if I just did what she wanted she’d keep me alive, and... Fuuuuuuck I’m like one of those pathetic nobodies in movies, the ones who help the villain because the villain says they’ll spare them if they do. The audience watching knows the villain is lying, and everyone thinks the nobody is a moron for believing the villain. I’m that nobody! I’m that moron!”

Vinicius tilted his head to the side, as much as the chains allowed.

“You—oh god, I’m sorry. You’ve been locked up down here for so long, you’ve never seen a movie or anything in a scrying pool. I—fuck fuck fuck fuck what do I do? What do I do!? I can... I can try and make the aura, and at least stay alive and keep her happy for now. But that’s not going to work forever. Adron and Kas are wrong. She’s going to kill me. She’s going to kill me.” Funny how getting to talk to someone, even someone who couldn’t really talk back beyond ‘yes’ or ‘no’, let her process her thoughts so much better.

“I have to do something! I have to... escape! Escape, I have to escape. Zel gives me a lot of freedom, because she thinks it’ll keep me on her side. I have to use that. I have to get out of here. But right now, she’s going to come back, and she’s going to expect me to have made progress on this aura thing. Panicking! I’m panicking. I—”

Vinicius let out a heavy grunt, and moved. Mia squeaked and jumped back as the chains rattled, the links ground on each other, and the metal wall screamed with the harsh scratching of the beast’s back spikes scraping against it.

“W-What’re you—”

Vinicius’s whole body flexed, muscles tensing to steel, as the creature fought against the chains harder. Blood oozed from the hole in his gut.

“Vinicius! What’re you doing!?! You can’t escape... right?” No, he couldn’t escape. He’d been locked down here for centuries. “You’re going to hurt yourself! Stop it, come on, I—”

He growled, a harsh and mean sound, and he pushed harder. One side of his body pushed against the chains, but the other side of him pushed into the wall, including his head. The room quivered, and the chains vibrated, clinking against each other as Vinicius fought against them. One side of him pressed its spikes into the wall hard enough she was sure he was going to break a limb.

Not a limb. A spike. A loud, heavy clunk rung through the metal room, a deep thud sound of bone hitting metal. On anyone else that’d have shattered bone, but not the bound monster. Instead, a black piece of spike fell from his body, and rolled forward along the floor toward her.

Vinicius relaxed, sighing with an obvious degree of pain and exhaustion, and he nodded toward the spike. He’d broken it off his shoulder.

Mia picked it up. It was warm, long, and its tip came to a very sharp point, sharper than she expected a body spike to have. Sharp enough she could have pricked herself and drawn blood if she wanted. A foot-long pointy thing with a subtle curve, and a few inches thick at the base.

“What the... You broke this off on purpose?”

He nodded.

“Why? Wh...” She sucked in a hard breath. Ice ran down her spine. Her fingers quivered, and sweat laced her palms. “You want me to kill Zel!?”

He nodded.

“Are you crazy!?! You want me to k...” Her breathing stopped. The boulder in her throat threatened to suffocate her. Zel would be back any minute, expecting her to be practicing her control aura, only to find Mia not doing that for the second time in a row. And Zel had made it clear what she’d do if Mia wasn’t at least trying.

No more time to think. Do what Vinicius wanted, or try the aura thing again? And she could try. She could toss the big spike aside, dig for the hidden strings, pluck them with her invisible fingers, and craft an aura. All she had to do was align her mind, get it on the right wavelength, and think ‘control’.

Or, she could do something now, before Zel killed her in the future, or bound her in the same leash she had Vinicius bound with, or stuck that rod through her stomach, too, or... or...

She stared at the big spike in her hand, and squeezed.

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~~David~~

They followed along as best they could. The giant lizard didn't move fast, but a lumbering slow pace from a giant was still fast enough David and the girls had to work hard if they wanted to keep up and hide at the same time. They scampered through ditches, dodged around big rocks, and stayed in the shadows of mountains as they followed along.

Demons emerged from Death's Grip. Dozens came out of hiding, from hunts in the tunnels, or their own little caves they hung out in, to investigate what was happening. If there were any humans nearby, they ran in the opposite direction; David never spotted a single one. The demons, on the other hand, seemed excited, and they scampered toward the tower with no attempt to hide themselves. A lot of them roared and screamed, battle cries that got even David's blood pumping.

Auras. The demons were using sin auras. As dozens, maybe hundreds of demons poured out of the various holes in the mountains nearby, hints of their distant auras flowed over the rocks, almost like invisible water, or maybe like sound bouncing around the stones. Silent, untouchable, but he felt it nonetheless, like heat in his veins that demanded he give into it. Aggression, violence, all the demons summoned the aura and buried the area with it. For a moment, he felt like a piranha, getting summoned by the swarm to frenzy and rip something to shreds.

"Is this a spire aura?" he whispered.

Caera, prowling ahead of him, shook her head.

"No. The spire aura will be a lot more obvious, but it doesn't overpower souls, just demons."

"And... we're not concerned Zel will use it?"

"We're much concerned," she said, without looking back to him.

Shit. If Zel used the spire aura, she'd be able to 'direct' the demons of Death's Grip, at least all demons the aura could penetrate, to come to the tower's defense. What the repercussions were of that, David had no idea. Did it have a cooldown? Would it have nasty side effects, or after effects?

"Will she—"

“We don’t know,” Jes said. “It’s been a hundred years since she last did.” The gargoyle crouched alongside him, and did her best to keep her wings down. Caera was huge compared to Jes, but Caera didn’t have big red wings to worry about giving away their position.

Daoka clicked a few times, hopping and crawling alongside him, too.

“Exactly,” Jes said. “Some weird dragon thing attacking the spire? The rider himself at her doorstep? Nothing like this has happened in... who the fuck knows how long. She just might use it.”

The four of them slipped into a nearby ditch that ran parallel to the oncoming dragon. This close, each step was like someone had plugged a bass guitar into David’s skull, tuned it down a whole step, and played the heavy string as hard as they could in a slow, thudding cadence. Boom. Boom. Vibration rattled through his brain into his teeth. The demons on the dragon didn’t look his way, though, and they barely noticed the dozens of other demons higher on the mountains and making no attempt to hide. They were drawn into whatever the rider was doing to them, and oblivious to anything else.

“What’ll happen if she uses it?” he asked.

“We’ll get drawn in,” Caera said. “If Zel was sending us out of the province, she’d have to use her spire tools to seal in the call of the horde. But we’re right here, no need to seal it.”

“Anything we can do to resist it?”

“Get deep underground like Renato, or get to the edge of the province.”

The edge would take a few weeks to reach at least, and considering Caera wasn’t making a beeline for a nearby tunnel, getting deep enough underground fast enough wasn’t a possibility.

“Then... what do we do?”

“No fucking idea,” Jes said.

Shit.

Daoka clicked once, shaking her head.

“We get to the spire valley edge, and watch what happens,” Caera said. “If Zel summons the horde, the three of us are fucked. I want to know what’s happening before that happens, before the horde call turns the three of us into... tools.”

Double shit.

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Twenty minutes later, they hid behind a curve of rock along a mountainside that merged into a ditch, and looked out to the valley. Rows upon rows of giant black spikes, many skewering a corpse, a skeleton, with some bodies still in the process of dying. Black metal pillars, topped with black skulls with fire behind their eyes. The spire stood in the middle of it all, the deepest part of the valley, a colossal structure of black metal, red flesh, and white bone. Enormous balconies circled it at various points, edges dotted with huge white fangs, and on the edges stood dozens of winged demons. Hundreds.

For each winged demon above, a demon stood on the ground below. Giant brutes, vrats, a few tigers, a few satyrs, and a few breeds he didn't recognize. Some wore black armor, some wielded big black swords and axes, many went naked and looked eager to use their claws. Above the primary entrance to the spire, upon the lowest balcony, stood a tetrad demon, a hulking monster with wings, giant horns, who stood on hooves and had no tail. He looked almost identical to the tetrad the rider had killed before, a korgejin.

"Saldavin," Caera said, nodding up toward the juggernaut.

Imps and grems scampered around, clicking, screeching, yelling, and hollering with excitement, but they didn't seem to be getting ready for battle. They were getting ready to eat the scraps. They were going to have a feast by the time the day was done.

"This is insane," Jeskura said. "Spire wars almost never happen anymore."

"It's not a spire war," Caera said. "No chance Alessio sent the rider. He's here for..." Sighing, she gestured David's way.

He mirrored the sigh. "For Mia, and me."

"He's only got a couple dozen demons with him," Jes said. "Sure, he's got aera armor, and the lizard, but Zel's got a fucking army with her. He's not going to be able to win this fight."

Daoka clicked a few times before nodding toward the spire, earning sighs from the girls.

"What—"

Jes jumped in. "She said if the rider is here for Mia, this isn't about winning and taking the spire. Hit and run. He's going to kill her, or kidnap her or whatever, and leave."

He grabbed his hair and fell back on his ass.

"Fuck fuck, fuck fuck fuck. What do I do?"

The girls looked between each other before shaking their heads.

“There’s nothing we can do,” Caera said. “We can’t even approach the spire like this.”

“We really should have just run in the opposite direction when we saw the rider,” Jes said.

Caera shook her head. “You know we wouldn’t have been able to get away from the spire and the horde call in time.”

“It might have bought us a little time before arriving, if Zel uses the horde call. Maybe we’d have arrived once everyone was dead.”

David snapped his eyes to her, but Jes only had a shrug for him.

“I’m not going to let Mia die,” he said.

Daoka clicked once as she squatted down beside him, patted him on the shoulder, and peeked around the rocks to look at the spire with her eyeless gaze. But all she had for him was a sigh, too.

“And I don’t want to get called for a horde,” Jes said, and she poked him in the stomach with her tail. “We’re stuck, too.”

“We have to sit and wait,” Caera said. “Zel might not use the horde summon, if she can avoid it. Last time, it left the whole province pretty shook up. And there’s already a lot of demons here, eager to fight, eager to eat the rider and see if they can absorb what makes him so special.” Slowly, the tiger pulled away from the rock, and pressed down low to the ground next to David. “Just, wait, okay? Don’t do anything stupid.”

“Anything stupid?”

Jes gestured to the tiny broken sword that’d somehow appeared in his hand.

“Every demon down there could kill you with a harsh glare, David, and that weird aura of yours won’t do anything but make them horny while they do it.”

“I—” He wanted to bring up how the aura could do different things. Caera had said so, from that one time they’d gone hunting together. But he didn’t get to finish the thought. The chaos began.

The four of them peeked around the curve of stone, up over the shallow ditch, and stared out into the valley. They crawled on their bellies, and risked peeking up over the slope of stone to look out into the madness.

David had half expected some sort of parley to happen, with maybe Zelandariel speaking out from the balcony and yelling down at the rider. Maybe the rider would have stopped his lizard mount, and

yelled back up at her for some epic conversation, a deadly monologue, something. All the demons would have stood there, waiting for the word to begin the battle, just like war scenes in the movies.

There was none of that. The rider and his group poured forward. The lizard picked up speed, and the ground shook with the weight of dragon feet smashing stone hard enough rocks shattered under its mass. It roared, and David and the ladies all covered their ears as the booming shock wave of sound crashed against the mountains. There was a hiss in there, a lizard-like sound mixed with the extreme bass of a movie explosion.

The sky darkened as a half-thousand demons and a thousand wings took to the air. Thousands more, if you counted the imps and grems, but they scattered like pigeons. Bigger wings blocked out the flames above, gargoyles and bat ladies, hundreds, and they shrieked as they descended onto the battlefield. But they parted when the only male with wings followed after them.

Gorlus, the other already dead korgejin tetrad, had been a colossal titan David had been sure would have fallen like a stone tossed off a roof if he'd taken to the air, and this Saldavin was just as big. But the wings were ridiculous, massive things each the size of his own body if not bigger, and they spread wide as they caught air and slowed the monster's descent toward the head of the lizard. Big as he was, he wasn't so big the lizard couldn't bite him in half, but as the dragon tried to do just that, the tetrad swung his giant sword down, and it crashed into the top of the dragon's snout.

The giant lizard's head fell to the side, and its weight fell with it. Its tail flickered wildly, and another hissing roar filled the valley as a splatter of blood splashed over the ground around its snout. The demons atop the dragon fell off, or maybe hopped off on purpose, and they greeted the oncoming tide with more battle cries. From a distance, they almost sounded like cries of joy.

The rider didn't fall. He held onto his reins, and while the tetrad Saldavin landed on the ground in front of his supposed kill, the dragon wasn't dead, or even dying. With a giant cut through its snout, it got back onto four feet, and charged forward toward the spire. Saldavin jumped aside, wings carrying the leap far, but all he could do was watch as the creature ran past him.

Before he could give chase, the tetrad the rider had brought with him, the fujara, screamed murder as she ran at him. She had four arms, her raptor talons gripped the stone beneath her, and a tail flicked left and right behind her as she leaned into the movement. Saldavin walked on hooves with an upright stance, and once the fujara got close he swung his sword down with both hands.

She dodged, stepping to the side. Saldavin's black sword crashed hard against the stone, loud enough it echoed against the mountains, and overcame the increasing noise of the erupting violence as more demons joined the fray. She wore much more armor, all of it was gold, and she had a gold short

sword in each hand. And she swung each of them, one after the other, each a rapid flurry of strikes that Saldavin had no choice but to block with his sword.

The only reason David could see their duel was their height. They towered over everyone else, even the brutes and tigers. The demons from the spire swarmed over the rider's troupe, surrounded them, and soon a sea of black armor, black and dark red skin, and black spikes surrounded the two dozen the rider had brought. It was like watching the Battle of Thermopylae. The dark tide couldn't push past the tight circle of gold and bronze-covered demons. Gliders fell on them, sometimes directly into the center, but they were cut into bits almost instantly as a demon spun around, chopped them down, and turned around to fight the waves.

Roars poured over the valley. Hundreds of the demons of Death's Grip raised hands and weapons, and the tide of claws and fangs flowed up to the sides of the dragon as it pushed forward to the tower, still mounted by the rider. It paused only long enough to swipe one of its hands in front of it, eviscerate a half dozen demons, and continue on.

But it was huge, and demons had an easy time attacking its legs, its chest, and even its tail. It had no trouble dealing with them at first, and a dozen more demons found themselves crushed under its hands. A couple more went down its gullet. At one point it stopped, and swiped with one leg and then the other, each swipe hitting a demon hard enough to send them flying, before a tail flick dislodged a couple more. It could only do so much against the horde, and a couple dozen threw themselves at its sides, biting, clawing, and stabbing. None of them managed to create a deep wound like Saldavin had, but they drew blood nonetheless, and soon the path behind the lizard was a mess of corpses and crimson.

The rider pressed on. He made no motions or movements other than pulling on the reins, and continued straight on toward the spire without looking back. The lizard's hands and feet crashed into the black spikes and pillars sticking up from the ground, and shattered them. It walked over cracks in the ground without issue, cracks the girls had assured David had lava flowing in them. It leaned down with a roar and charge forward, and smashed aside a swath of demons that tried to latch onto its head.

Finally at the tower, the lizard let out another bellowing roar loud enough it ringed in David's ears. It stood up. The lizard sat back onto its hind legs, and reached high as it balanced. One hand reached out and pressed against the colossal tower, another reached higher again as it stretched out its legs. It got its claws around the lower balcony on the outside of the tower, and pressed its bloody snout to its edge.

"What the fuck," David said.

The rider released the reins, and walked up the dragon's snout up onto the balcony, bypassing the hundred demons pouring out of the primary entrance. He disappeared over the metal and big white teeth of the balcony edge, and David could no longer see.

But he knew where the rider was going.

"I... don't think Zel is going to have time to summon the horde," Caera said. "Not like she can just flip a switch and it happens. It takes a few minutes to get going, at least. If this battle went on for a bit, sure, she could, but the rider doesn't look like he's here for a battle, or even to kill Zel and take over the spire. He's..."

"Going straight for Mia." David grabbed the hilt of his tiny broken sword, and stood up.

Dao tackled him.

"Hey!"

Chirping up a storm, Dao sat on him and swung her arms around wildly, before poking him hard in the side of his chest his half breastplate didn't cover.

"She's right," Caera said. "There's nearly a thousand demons down there, getting lost in all that sin. If you go down there, you might get caught up in it."

Jes managed a weird chuckle. "Or, you know, get cut up and eaten on the spot."

"I have to get to Mia!"

Shaking her head, Dao put both her hands down against his shoulders and refused to move.

"You're not going anywhere," Caera said. "Going in there would be suicide. Best chance we have is to wait until—"

The dragon let out a roar, and all the girls snapped their eyes — and bone forehead plate thing — toward the sound.

"Holy shit," Jes said. "That thing is going berserk."

Clicking a dozen times, Dao grabbed David by the ear, and reduced him to a bunch of 'ows' as she dragged him back down along their stomachs toward the lip of stone they peeked over. Sure enough, the big lizard, now without rider, was going crazy. It spun around, faced the hundreds of demons swarming around its feet, and embraced violence in a way only a honey badger would. Sheer, reckless insanity.

"It's a suicide mission for... all the demons the rider brought?" he asked. "And the hellbeast?"

“No idea,” Caera said. “I don’t see any way of them getting out. Even with aera armor, and that creature.”

“The rider wouldn’t come here just to kill Mia and then die,” Jes said. “I mean, that doesn’t make any sense, does it?”

Kill Mia. The words cut across his chest straight to his heart. Ice ran through his veins, and his lungs seized as he stared out at the waves and waves of demons throwing themselves at the dragon.

The demons didn’t seem to mind giving into violence and dying in battle. Whether that was because of the sin auras they were releasing, turning the valley into a mosh pit gone rogue, or because demons just loved to fight that much, he didn’t know. The girls with him weren’t like that... except, they kinda were. Jes and Dao hadn’t hesitated to kill those humans, the ones that’d attacked them, or the imps and grems on the day they met. Caera hadn’t hesitated to kill those humans when she and David had gone hunting. And from the look on the tiger demon’s face, she was itching to get in there and do some fighting. Same for Jes, even Dao, who both licked their fangs as they watched.

It wasn’t that they were different than other demons, but made an effort to keep those same urges from controlling them.

He watched them, and smiled. He’d really gotten lucky with them, beyond lucky. But he wasn’t going to sit here and wait for Mia to die.

Logic, out the window. Not a single intelligent thought going through his head, and he knew it. Just one thought, one stupid thought. His sister, his twin, the only person in the world who really knew him, was going to die unless he did something.

He shoved Dao hard enough she hit Caera, and the satyr chirped once in shock as David bolted over the edge. Somewhere in the back of his mind, a little piece of him was aware what he was doing was crazy. It screamed and yelled, told him to get back with the girls, but the tiny voice drowned underneath the roars of the battle.

Before him was the valley, huge and mostly flat, surrounded by mountains. There had to be at least a kilometer between him and the spire, and unfortunately, the hiding spot Caera had picked for them after the invisible monster attack meant each time their little group approached the tower, they approached it from the front, the same direction the rider had approached it from, putting his whole army in David’s way. The only front-ish thing about it was the giant cave-like entrance at the base facing their way, but that looked as good an entrance as any.

The only hope he had was to take advantage of the chaos.

He didn't look behind him. There were noises, girl's voices, probably Jes's and Caera's and Dao's chirps and clicks, but just like the tiny, logical voice in his head, they were buried. His feet slapped the stones, the balls of his toes catching the hard ground, the only saving grace the callus armor his feet had developed since arriving. His heart rate jumped like someone had injected cocaine, adrenaline, and PCP straight into his veins. Everything went hot, and then numb.

Just keep moving.

The demons all faced toward the dragon and the gold-armored demons, and they were off to the side, not directly in his path. By about a whole twenty feet. He had no choice but to veer around them, and the further he veered to the side, the longer the trip would take. Better that than getting caught up in the chaos.

To his right, nearly a thousand demons of all shapes and sizes, many naked, many wearing slabs of black armor, some with weapons some not, all of them throwing themselves against the demons in gold and bronze. None of them looked David's way, and he risked cutting closer to the crowd.

The cries of pain were... demonic. Axes and swords butchered Zel's demons and sent their parts arcing through the sky before smacking the ground or over the heads of the swarming demons. One of Zel's brutes, over eight feet tall, no spikes or tail but all muscle and black skin, fell apart at the waist. A gold sword cut through him from side to side, and when the brute's torso hit the stone, the gold-clad demon turned its red eyes toward David.

With the layers of gold and red-tinted bronze, he didn't recognize the breed buried under the many layers of beautiful, horrifying metal. Its head was covered, but black horns came out from behind the helmet regardless, and the helmet's bottom had enough room for the creature's long snout to open for it to roar. A whole half second reprieve before it turned to the next demon that came to it. Whoever the demons in gold armor were, they weren't just better equipped. They were trained.

Gliders came down onto the battlefield on his left, and they shrieked with hunger as they ran at him. Not at him, around him. Like magnets to magnets, the gargoyle and bat women poured past him, and he had to hop back at one point to avoid getting run over. They couldn't even see him. Some of them jumped onto the backs of brutes, vrats, and tigers, anything bigger than them they could use to vault over the crowd to get to the other demons. Others went low and ducked under weapons and arms. None of them gave a shit about the possibility of dying.

Not entirely true. Some demons were smarter, and waited for the opportunity to strike, not caught up in the mindlessness of the riot turned slaughter. When a fellow demon went down, they jumped in and climbed over the corpse to take a stab at the gold-protected demon, only to jump back and let the

crazier demons take a stab. Maybe the sin auras drowning the place affected some demons more than others, but it definitely affected David. The violence permeated him, hooked claws into him, and demanded he join in the madness.

He ran past them, and ignored the blood-soaked, delicious aura as best he could. A demon ahead of him turned to face him, a brute, but the death cry of the demon between him and the gold demons yanked his vision away. David ducked underneath him, between his legs, and kept going. A tiger came flying out of the insanity on David's right, and blood gushed out of her empty shoulder socket. She pushed herself back up, and marched back into the fray.

David's foot splashed in the blood she left behind. He didn't look back.

A vrat stepped back from the battle, sword in hand. Over seven feet tall, he was the classic example of a demon, with a thick tail, raptor feet, a skull-ish demon face, a couple big horns, and a mostly human body shape. One of the most common demon breeds, and the battle around David proved it, with dozens of nearby vratorins throwing themselves into the fight.

The opening the vrat created in the battle lines showed a gold demon on the ground, a horn broken off, helmet knocked off too, and a deep gash that cut halfway through their skull. They'd had two gold axes, and now the vrat had them.

The vrat turned to face David, and David did the first thing that came to his mind.

"Look!" He pointed back toward the rider's demons.

The vrat turned, and the sight of violence lit something in it. A single glance was all it took for the auras the demons around him exuded for the vrat to give into the urge, forget about David, and run back into the violence. David almost followed him, tiny broken sword clutched in hand.

He didn't. Half because of Mia, the reason he was risking a random sword, axe, or claw separating him from his legs. Half, because of the five-eyed dragon.

The titanic creature turned toward the demons, straight toward David. The center eye looked directly to him, and David froze. Chains dangled to and fro from the two smaller horns on the top of its skull, next to the array of colossal horns almost as big as its head, no longer held by the rider. Blood dripped from the deep gash in its snout, but it made no effort to cover the wound or protect itself.

It wasn't like an animal on the surface. It didn't try to find a place to retreat to recover. It didn't do the evolutionary, tried-and-true tactic of only risking minor injuries for a meal, and never its life. It, like the demons, wanted to get into the violence. It wanted to fight and slaughter, more than it wanted to survive. And it set its five-eyed gaze straight on David.

A couple tiger ladies pounced the dragon's arms, and jumped up onto its back. Neither had weapons, but just like Caera they had big teeth and claws, and they used them. Roaring with desire and hunger, or maybe just rabid mindlessness, the two ladies sank their fangs and claws through the dragon's thick skin. That was enough to pull the dragon's attention, and again it lost itself in the whirlpool of blood and death.

Two whole seconds of holding still was two seconds too long, and another demon came at David from his left again, a satyr woman.

"Dao!?" He spun to face her. She came at him with a sword. Not Dao.

Whether the satyr was actually attacking at him or just mindlessly swinging at whatever was in front of her, he didn't know, but she swung the big black weapon down at him, and he sidestepped. His hand lashed out, and the tiny, broken, heavy blade got the demon in the neck.

She stepped back, clutched her throat, and aimed her eyeless gaze at him. She lowered her head, aimed her bald skull and four huge ram horns at him, and charged. Maybe she meant to charge at him, force him to dodge again, swing the sword, and catch him on the recovery. She didn't get to the second step. He jumped back again, and the satyr fell to the ground.

She tried to get up, arms shaking with the effort. Her head fell, her horns hit the stones, and she stopped moving. Blood poured out of her neck in spurts, flowed over the flat, hard ground, and joined more blood. And bodies.

Half a second. He gave himself half a second of contemplation and realization, just long enough to look at the dead satyr and how dreadfully similar she looked to Daoka. He looked at the blood on his tiny, useless broken sword, and then back to the spire. Don't stop. Brood later.

He bolted. The spire grew closer, and the bodies in his way grew in number. Demons poured out of the main entrance, toward the dragon and the mosh pit, but none went back in. Maybe they didn't realize the rider had entered the tower. Saldavin and the fujara tetrad continued to fight, their great height allowing them to tower over the crowd. David ran past them, only fifty feet and a dozen demons between him and them before he got past the apex of the crowd. Smooth sailing from there on out?

No such luck. One demon fell in front of him, leg cut off at the knee, and he had to jump over them. He tripped. His shin cracked hard against a piece of their armor, and he crashed into the blood-soaked stone. Stars dotted his vision, and pain flooded him a moment later. Only when he pushed himself back up onto his feet and resumed running did he realize blood flowed down over his chin and

neck. Some of it was from the ever increasing crimson that soaked the area. Some of it was from his broken nose.

Just keep running.

Another demon stumbled into his path, some sort of dinosaur creature, titanic, with a dragon-like face and a flat head that almost seemed shark-like. Two big horns came out from the sides of his head, and connected to the dark bone plate of his flat skull. Shark dragon dinosaur? Mental note: ask the girls later. Short legs and long arms allowed the creature to walk on all fours, kinda like Caera, if Caera was less lizard-cat-like and more big-scary-dinosaur shaped. Whoever he was, he turned his eyeless face toward David just long enough for David to pause and look at him in return. Whoever this creature was, his face was unreadable.

“Wh—” The creature’s words, thick and guttural, were cut short. A gold-armored demon came at him, a brute, and the hulking creature swung a giant axe straight down at the other demon’s head.

David didn’t watch to see what happened. He jumped over the shark dinosaur’s huge spiky tail, and kept going. Roars and the clangs of metal and bone followed behind him, and someone’s shrieks of rage ended short. He kept going.

The Godzilla dragon turned. Maybe a demon bit its heels or tail, but something caused the giant beast to turn, and despite how long it took for something that big to turn around, its tail came around fast, the tip moving car speed. Demons toppled, big and small, black and gold armor, and only the wave of their collapses gave David warning.

He jumped, as high as his legs could get him. Not high enough. The giant tail swept under him, front to back, and clipped his feet hard enough he somersaulted. The world turned into a blur of reds and blacks, and gravity lost all meaning as he spun through the air. Again the ground crashed into him, and this time the backlash of pain that followed poured out of his arm.

He knew that feeling. That was a dislocated shoulder. Again. He ground his teeth, snatched his useless little sword off the ground with his good arm, and got up. His left arm dangled in its socket, and pain shot from his shoulder into his back, neck, and skull, with each frantic step he took.

He took them anyway. The spire was close, damn close, and he risked a glance up at its towering size, its flesh and bone, its black metal, and the balconies that circled it. No way a demon built this.

He ran for the entrance, and the battle grew further and further behind him. No more demons came at him from the sides. No more demons jumped in front of him. No demons fell in his path. Only

the cave-like entrance of the huge building before him. What demons had been inside were now outside, giving him a clear path to get into the spire.

But now that he was inside, what the fuck now?

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Mia~~

She clutched the spike tight in her hands until her fingers went white. What to do what to do what to do. Oh god if she didn't do something right now she was going to get strung upside down and tortured and... and... and probably a lot worse than tortured. Zel would do things to her that defied the word.

If Zel found her trying to craft the aura, she'd let her live. For now. She wanted Mia's power, her ability to read the ancient language, and—wait, Adron and Kas didn't tell her she saw memories when she ate that demon heart. That meant something. That had to mean something.

They didn't trust Zel either, maybe? Maybe they thought if Zel knew about that quirk, she might do something to Mia even they thought she shouldn't?

And even ignoring all that, there was no denying that Zel would eventually turn on Mia, enslave her, use a rod on her, kill her, something. She wouldn't share power, or even treat Mia nicely once she didn't have to. Zel had shown her true colors, if only for a moment, a moment too long.

Mia squeezed tighter. She had to do this. She had to do this, and... and...

David. Her brother was out there, and she was making no effort in finding and rescuing him. She had to get out there and save him. The longer she waited, the higher the chance she'd never find him, or he'd die, or anything. The chances of her finding him were already pretty much nil, but he had to be alive — much as anyone was in the afterlife — and she refused to believe otherwise! He had to be. Had to be.

Sighing, she buried her face in her palms. If she did this and went on the run, she'd probably have to leave Kas and Adron and Hannah behind. Adron and Hannah were the closest thing she had to friends, sorta, and Kas... Just thinking about the stoic big asshole made her angry, and happy, and now sad because she'd have to leave him instead of getting a chance to peel the layers and see what sort of

man he was underneath. Maybe he was a great, empathetic demon? Or maybe he was an asshole through and through. She'd never get to find out.

And of course there was the fact all three of those people had made her cum and cum hard, more than a couple dozen times in, what, three or four days? Her first sexual experiences, extreme and insane and so absurdly good even now the tingly desire for more crept up on her. She banished the thoughts quickly. She could lament abandoning the best sex life she'd ever get later. David was more important. Her life and freedom were more important.

“God, what do I do if I... if I...” Groaning, she threw her hands up and spun around. “I—” A glint of amber caught her eye. She froze, and stared at the back wall and the small chain that dangled there on a hook. The leash.

With a heavy gulp, she forced her eyes back up to the colossal monster bound to the opposite wall.

“If... If I... kill Zel, can you escape?”

He met her gaze, and his red demon eyes held hers. No response. Those chains were massive, and even with enough strength to break one of his spikes off — which felt like steel in her hand — he hadn't been strong enough to break a chain.

“I guess killing her doesn't somehow automatically undo your chains.”

He grunted and nodded.

“Is it possible for me to free you? Can I get these chains off?”

The beast managed a small smile, a subtle thing only the inner corners of his dragony demon snout could manage. He nodded.

She stepped around one of his legs and looked up. The chains were locked firmly in place, but that didn't make any sense. Zel had locked him up, which meant there had to have been a point where the chains were workable. Maybe they—oh, there was a chain behind the beast, pulling at the other chains, locking them tight around wall hooks to keep his limbs spread. The center chain was bound to its own hooks along the wall, and went up and down the wall so each chain that bound the creature's limbs had a different place it could bind to the center chain.

Intricate. But, at the bottom, there was some sort of lock mechanism, a big block thing that held the chain tight to the wall hooks. If she undid that, he'd... still be locked up, because he could only move forward away from the wall and that'd just pull on the chains on the hooks. She'd have to unhook the chains herself, while standing underneath his legs and behind him. Scary.

“Okay! Okay, plan. I need a plan.” She pulled on her hair as she stepped back and paced in circles. “Plan. Plan. Plan. I need to... to... make a decision.” Brilliant plan. “Okay! I... I...” Slowly, her eyes went back to the leash. “Demons make deals, right?” Stupid plan. Her only plan.

Vinicius tilted his head.

“Demons, they make deals? It’s a big thing in storytelling on the surface, that demons make contracts, deals with humans. The demon has to obey the word of the contract, but not the spirit of it, and will either honor the contract that’s ultimately to the person’s detriment, or try and find a way to violate the contract without breaking it so they can fuck the human over.” Full rant mode. She was stalling. “I... I guess that doesn’t apply here. But, either way, I have a deal to offer!” She gestured to the leash. “I’m going to get the leash, because, I mean, you’re a demon and I can’t trust you any further than I can throw you. And then I’m going to find a way to free you. Then you’re going to help me. Okay? You help me, and—”

The metal door swung open, and the ancient reflex of a child to hide something they’re not supposed to have at the sound of an approaching adult kicked in. She put her hands behind her back, spike pointed up.

Zel stood there, alone, and her usually calm, even playful, occasionally angry face held something Mia had never expected to see on her. Panic. Or maybe, frustration crossed with panic? She was rushing, in a hurry, and she set her eyes on Mia.

“Come with me.”

“W-What? I—”

“Come with me! The rider is here, and has launched some absurd suicidal assault on the spire.”

“The rider? I—”

“The blasted rider shows himself now, of all times! He’s come for you, clearly. I will not risk your life to him, whether he is here to kill you or steal you away. Now come with me!” She reached down, grabbed Mia’s shoulder, and pulled her toward the door. Her three metal rods were nowhere to be found, thank god.

Mia risked a quick glance back up at Vinicius, before she stepped forward with Zel.

“The rider is here for me? I don’t... but I...” She stopped moving.

Mistake. Zel squatted down in front of her, grabbed her by the shoulders with two hands, and grabbed her by the neck with two others. Just one of the ten-foot-tall demon woman’s hands was big

enough to completely circle her throat, let alone two. Her red eyes on her smooth, beautiful, alien mask-like face glared at Mia with enough fury to incinerate her. The amber horn in the middle of her black horns glowed, and heat poured out of it over Mia's face hot enough to almost burn.

“You are mine. Your life is mine. If you so much as open your mouth again without my permission, I will rip out your tongue, and that will be but the first thing on my list of tortures I will force upon you every night.” She pulled Mia in closer, until the demon's subtle nose almost touched hers. Whatever patience Zel had to be nice with Mia was gone, evaporated, by the rider's attack. “Understand me, slave? I am done playing games with you. The rider is here for you, proving how essential you are. I will no longer entertain this ridiculous dance of playful threats. You are mine! My tool! You will obey me, or so help me Lilith herself will—”

Mia sank the spike into Zel's left eye, as hard as she could. It sank through flesh far more easily than it should have.

Time froze. Zel stared at Mia. Mia stared at Zel in her one remaining eye. No one said a thing, total silence that stretched on and on until eternity seemed but a moment in the endless nothing. The spike went deep. It'd been sharper than Mia had thought, and Mia had put as much strength into the swing as she could. Years of exercising meant she had a bit of strength to work with, more than anyone thought a tiny ginger girl like her had, but that couldn't explain how easily the spike had parted flesh, and sunk deep into Zel's brain.

Zel should have dodged. She could have dodged, if she hadn't been lost in her rage, and utterly convinced of her superiority. The mix of searing fury and freezing cruelty coming out of the demon queen brought Mia's heart to a standstill, and only once the next heart beat kicked in did the eternity end.

“How... dare... y...” Zel's one eye held Mia's until it rolled upward. The demon queen's grip on her throat loosened, and eventually the grip on her shoulders, too. Almost as if trying to resist what just happened, to deny the reality, Zel refused to simply fall over. Her squat turned into a kneel, and for another moment, her single eye managed to refocus on Mia, and one of her hands reached out for her. Mia stepped back.

The bolstara tetrad fell on her side, and went still.

“Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god. What have I done?” Mia, eyes locked on the corpse of the demon queen and the big spike sticking out of her eye, knelt down in front of her. With a shaky, hesitant hand, she shook the giant woman's shoulder. No response. She pushed her over enough — fucking christ she was heavy — to see her chest, and watched. No breathing. Dead.

The amber horn on the queen's head glowed, flickered, and died.

“Oh fucking god. She's dead. She's dead and... and... I have no escape plan!” She'd seen enough documentaries and read enough about murderers to know the great flaw killers had was their obsession in planning a kill, and seeming inability to plan what to do after. Those people went to jail. She was going to get eaten alive, literally. “Shit shit shit! I have to...”

The door was open, and the door beyond it. Zel had come in in a rush, forgetting to close the second door. She always kept at least one of the two door closed between Vinicius and the dungeon.

Mia could run away, right now. No one knew Zel was dead, and other demons were used to seeing her around. Normally Kas would be with her.

Kas. He was probably waiting outside the dungeon. Maybe she could run to him, and ask for his help?

No! No. She liked Kas, and she was sure there was a decent guy in there, but that didn't mean she could trust him. Kas had said that himself, you can't trust demons.

She looked back to the leash dangling on the wall, and then to Vinicius. He had a small smile on again, and it looked a little more evil than she wanted.

“Okay. Okay. Okay okay plan plan. I need... keys! To find the keys! Do you know where the keys are? To your chains?”

Vinicius shook his head.

“Fuck fuck fuck! But, it does take keys, right? Keys would work?”

He nodded.

She ran out to the dungeon.

Corpses, everywhere. Skeletons, everywhere. All Zel's torture victims. Demons and souls, still alive, strapped down to bone chairs covered in spikes. Demons and souls missing limbs, sitting in cells of metal bars, with more spikes. She ignored them and their groans and screams as best she could.

“Keys, keys, keys.” She forced her eyes up and around, and scampered around between bodies, blood, writhing screaming souls, and demons that glared at her with confusion and rage. Their cells had big metal padlocks, smaller than the one holding Vinicius's chains, but still, something that took a key. “Okay, someone here, tell me where the keys are! If you tell me where the keys are, I'll let everyone out!” Much as the idea of freeing these demons and souls sickened her, there was a good chance Zel

locked them up more for disobeying her orders, rather than being so evil they had to be imprisoned. And besides, she'd free them only after Vinicius was free, and he'd protect her.

She'd make him protect her.

One of the demons in a nearby cell, one of the few who wasn't dead, managed to cough up a choked sound.

“Zel—”

“Zel's dead!” Mia gestured back to the room. “You saw her go in, and you don't hear her anymore! Where are the keys!?”

The demons looked between each other, before the vrat in the cell spoke up again. Poor guy was pinned to the wall, but not by chains. He had spikes through his wrists and ankles, crucifying him to the metal wall.

“In her... throne room.”

Mia's heart sank into her stomach, and her shoulders fell with it. On the first day she'd arrived at the spire, getting to the throne room from the ground floor had burned her legs off. This trip would be twice as long, past demons, past maybe Kas or Adron or Diogo, or...

She stood up straight, sucked in a breath, tightened her hands into fists, and ran for the dungeon exit.