

~~Mia~~

The two giant metal doors, decorated with skulls and chains, were closed. Mia wasn't getting out of the dungeon unless she opened them, and sure enough, she wasn't strong enough to do so. She pressed against them, and even with her bare feet getting a decent grip on the metal floor, they didn't budge.

But maybe someone was waiting on the other side? Adron or Kas? If it was Adron, then maybe...

She knocked on the door, hard as she could, and tapped on the rhythm everyone knew. Shave and a Haircut.

She got a couple of knocks back. Slowly, the enormous doors opened, Mia stepped back, and Adron stood in the now open path to freedom.

"Mia? What happened? Where's Zel?"

"Zel's busy. We need to get to her throne room, now!"

"What?"

"We need to get to her throne room now!" Mia marched forward and shoved the demon in the stomach.

Adron stared at her, unmoving. "You can't just—"

"Adron, please? I'll explain everything after."

After a slow frown and heavy sigh, Adron looked past her into the deep dungeon. There was no chance he'd see anything, this far from Vinicius's cell, but the fact he couldn't see Zel up and about was the problem.

"Alright."

"Alright? Alright!" Oh thank god. Maybe there was a little more to Adron than the mask he wore, a little more to him than the playful, mischievous, conniving demon he enjoyed being. Maybe he felt a little connection to the young woman he'd deflowered? Maybe—Maybe Mia you're being an idiot and you can psychoanalyze later.

They ran out to the balcony. Chaos. Normally there were big teeth doors around, like Mia's, something that needed to be opened with the spire's power. They were open, teeth pulled up and down out of the way into the skull archways. Betrayers, imps and grems, succubi and incubi, they all stepped

out onto the balconies above and below, and the sound of panicked voices mixed with the screams of remnants.

“What’s... going on?” she asked.

Adron knelt down, she slipped onto his back, and the demon wasted no time running to the balcony edge and jumping up to the next floor.

“The rider is attacking,” he said between grunts. Every few seconds, he grabbed a dangling chain, or a dangling cage, or the rim of the next balcony up the spire’s center, whatever allowed him to traverse as much distance as possible as quickly as possible.

“Zel said that, but I don’t know what that means.”

“Me neither. I’ve never seen him. But he’s come at the spire with a massive hellbeast, and what looks like a couple dozen demons armed from False Gate.”

“A couple dozen? How many demons are defending the spire?”

“Probably five or six hundred, and another five or six hundred demons in the mountains nearby.”

Mia jaw-dropped. “Against two dozen?”

“In aera armor, and that hellbeast is... massive.” He shook his head, and focused on his breathing as he got faster. The higher they went up, the louder the noises got, and soon the sound of roars and metal hitting metal joined them.

They passed the ground floor, and Mia managed a quick peek out through the big hallway to the outside. It was like a battlefield. No, it was a battlefield. Adron didn’t give her time to get a good look, but a peek was enough to catch the sight of limbs flying, demons cut in half, and the legs of something that looked like Godzilla bred with an iguana and a demon.

Adron said no more. Demons didn’t sweat, but she felt the heat pour off his body as he pushed himself, and his breathing grew faster and ragged. It was hard holding onto him, especially with the black spikes on his back. Half the size of the one she’d stabbed Zel with, but still problematic, and she winced as a few of them scratched her skin. Her white silk wrap couldn’t protect her from a stiff breeze, let alone accidental stabbing.

The throne room wasn’t on the top floor, but it was a ways up. By the time they reached it, a couple minutes had passed, and that was enough to give Mia an eyeful of what else was going on. She was right. All the doors that’d been closed by teeth were open. Zel’s death, the way her extra amber horn had glowed and then died, it’d done something. Mia had half expected the tower to explode or

light up with a big amber beacon or something, but nope, it was more like someone had flipped a switch to off mode.

How did someone become the new spire owner, anyway?

“Why are the sealed doors open?” Adron asked as he set her down.

“I... um...” She took a step toward a nearby big doorway, Zel’s throne room, a giant black skull open mouth, with fire burning in its empty eyes. It was tall enough for even Vinicius to walk through.

She didn’t get far. Adron put a hand on her shoulder.

“What did you do?”

“Umm... I’ll tell you in the throne room, okay?” She gestured to the throne room entrance.

“Come on. If that... that rider person is here for me, we should do this quickly.” The rider and his assault were the only reason demons weren’t around to stop Mia, ironically enough. They were outside, fighting, and dying.

“The rider won’t be able to beat Zel and her strongest enforcers in a fight, not if they surround him.”

“About that.” She gulped and nodded toward the big skull door again.

The demon relented and followed her into the vast room.

The throne of metal and bone sat empty. Amber veins ran along the walls, still gently pulsing with the lifeblood of Hell. Whatever Zel’s death had done, it hadn’t undone the spire itself, just maybe the decisions she’d made with its power? It didn’t matter. Mia ran to the table of stone, climbed a big bone chair, and stood on it so she could look down at the table.

No luck.

“Keys! Where are the keys!?”

“Keys?”

“Keys! The keys to the dungeon. One of the demons down there told me they’d be up here. And I mean, it’s not like anyone would go around releasing prisoners under Zel’s nose, right? So she probably wouldn’t have hid them. Help me!” Maybe on the throne? On a wall somewhere? There were so many damn random metal spikes and chains hanging from the ceiling and shit, they could be right in front of her and she wouldn’t notice them.

Adron stared at her, eyes wide. It was a strange sight, seeing an eight-foot-tall demon man, all muscled and handsome, scary too with his demony face, big powerful jaw, skull-like eye sockets, big black horns, all of it absolutely paralyzed.

“What happened to Zelandariel?”

“She’s dead!” Mia ran up to the demon and slapped both her palms against his chest, the highest point she could reach. He wore some pieces of black armor, but that didn’t matter. She could have tackled him and it wouldn’t have moved him. “I killed her! She’s dead. She’s dead, her corpse is lying in Vinicius’s cell, and the only chance I have of surviving any of this insanity is grabbing Vinicius’s leash and making him protect me so I can get out of here!”

She pushed off him and got back to looking. On the back of the throne? No. On the walls? Hundreds of big black spikes, and plenty of them held dangling tiny chains, some tipped with amber stones like the one around Mia’s neck. No keys, though.

“You... what? You... Why?”

“Why kill her? Because she was going to torture me, break me, turn me into a slave, anything and everything she could to turn me into a tool! She’s worse than you know! Than Kas knows!” She ran around the throne twice. No luck. “Why leave? Because I have to find my brother! He’s out there and I have to find him! And I’m going to use Vinicius to do it!”

“Brother?”

“Yes!” She threw up her hands and glared at him as hard as she could. Now would be the perfect time for her to be able to control her aura, to push out what she felt into the air, and get Adron on the same wavelength as her. That only happened when she was horny. Now, the panic she felt, the need she had to get Adron to help her, none of that resonated on the strings inside her. All she could do was communicate her desperation with her eyes and her voice.

Adron, his own eyes still wide and locked on her, slowly walked toward the side of the room, and reached into an alcove in the wall.

“This is normally covered in closed teeth, like your bedroom door.”

“Oh. It’s... yeah... I guess maybe she did want to protect the keys, from being stolen or something.” With a heavy gulp, she held out her hand to Adron.

The look on his face said everything. He hadn’t believed her at first, but seeing Zel’s keys unguarded and unprotected sealed in the reality for him. His master was dead.

Slowly, he set the keys in her hand. That was a strange looking set of keys, very medieval, and heavy as hell. Each one was more like a big hammer, or axe, or something long with a square-ish blade at the end that, on closer inspection, wasn't sharp. They were attached at the end of a chain like Mia's necklace, each key as big as her whole hand, and one of them as big as her forearm. Definitely the key for Vinicius's lock.

Mia's gaze settled on the keys in her right hand before looking back up to Adron and his frozen expression. Nodding, she took her necklace off with her free hand, and threw it away as hard as she could, back toward the throne. It bounced off it and landed back on the floor with barely a noise. Not exactly the cathartic, climactic moment she wanted, but whatever, that could come later.

"Are you upset Zel's dead?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Are you going to stop me?"

"I... don't know."

"We can talk about it later, okay? I have to get back down there, now. You still going to help me?"

He took a small step back, his tail dead weight between his legs. She didn't need her limited education in psychology to see the demon's world had been shattered. So much time working for Zel, to the point he was sort of her double agent, spying on the bailiff Diogo and his Gorzen Mountains district, and now all of that was gone. And not because of some big battle with a neighboring province.

She poked him in the stomach. "You could come with me, you know? You and Hannah, Kas too if he doesn't hate me too much."

"He won't hate you. He will be... confused. And... I don't..."

"Zel's dead. I stabbed her, with one of Vinicius's spikes. She's not here, and—"

"One of his spikes?"

"He broke one off."

It was Adron's turn to gulp this time, and he rubbed one of the small spikes coming out of an elbow.

"She's really dead?"

"Come with me and I'll show you. Come with me, out of this place, and we can find my brother and... and..." She punched him in the stomach. Of course it barely fazed him, but how else was she

supposed to get across how she felt? Confession of attraction? Maybe a quick speech about how this asshole who'd taken her virginity owed it to her to help her? And maybe, just maybe, that she kind of liked him?

No, clearly not. Gut punching was better.

"I... don't know..."

"At least get me back down to the dungeon! I need to help Vinicius."

"I told you about him, Mia."

"I know. Zel's got a leash on him, and if I use that, I can at least... sorta... maybe... control him, a little?" If that'd been true, Zel wouldn't have needed Mia to break him, or Valzanal's tools, or any of that. The leash would hopefully be enough to at least stop Vinicius from killing her, and anyone else as long as she kept an eye on him. It was a pain leash, and that was all.

Adron took another deep breath, a resetting breath, one Mia had taken many times.

"Okay. After we get Vinicius, we get Hannah, maybe find Kas if he's not dead out in that fight, and we... figure something out?"

"Kas is out there?"

"He is, fighting near the entrance with the other enforcers. But with that giant lizard thing, it got pretty hectic."

Oh god, Kas. If he died, she... she wasn't sure how she'd feel. Him and Adron, that first night, how much had it meant to Kas, compared to her? Probably not much. At least Adron seemed to have some emotional depth, enough that he liked Hannah more than he probably thought he did. And maybe Mia, too. Kas, she didn't know. She wanted to know, but now she might not get to.

She squeezed the keys, looked back at the empty throne, back to her huge demon protector, and nodded as confidently and courageously as she could. Not very, but better than nothing.

"Let's go."

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~~David~~

The inside of the spire was scarier than the outside, walls of metal and flesh, bone and teeth and everything between. Remnants grew out of them, poor souls trapped in unending pain, and they screamed as they reached out for him. He could never tell if they wanted his help pulling them out of whatever surface they were attached to or growing out of, or if they wanted him to kill them. And right now, all he could do was ignore them.

There were a lot more balconies on the inside of the tower, and a big hole between them that went up and up, and down and down. The spire looked to be as deep as it was tall.

“Fuck fuck fuck.” He walked to the edge, and his eyes locked onto the dangling chains and cages inside the hole. Remnants sat within, bound to the cages, some with metal bars penetrating their entire bodies without killing them, leaving them in agony. Their cries were quiet compared to the raging battle outside.

Doorways sat nearby. Some were made of metal. Some of flesh, like exposed muscle, ready to be cut open by a huge scalpel. A few looked like open mouths of big sharp teeth, complete with a giant skull and open jaw around them.

There were demons, but few. Most of them were outside, and the ones inside ran around, either on the way out, or up or down the tower. They didn’t take any stairs, if there were any. They jumped up the hole in the center, going from balcony to balcony, using chains and cages for landing points. Others jumped down, hopping from floor to floor. How the fuck would he get around?

One archway of flesh and bone showed stairs of white. A bone stairway. A few humans ran up it, a few ran down, each with 666 written on their forehead and every one of them in a panic. Betrayers, many followed by succubi and incubi. Okay, if he wanted to fit in, he had to hide his forehead. Thankfully, he had shaggy red hair.

He lifted his arm and—

“Fuck!” He fell to a knee, and that only made the pain worse as his dislocated arm flexed and pulled at the joint. All that did was grind the bone in the wrong spot, not in the socket.

What to do what to do? He could grab one of the betrayers, and ask them about Mia. With how much panic was going on, they might just answer him. But he could barely move. Every breath was burning agony, and being on his knees for even just a few seconds was Heaven.

He pushed himself back up to his feet and backed up toward a wall. Sweat dripped down his body, and he slipped his broken weapon back into the waist of his leather skirt. How to fix your own dislocated shoulder? He’d looked it up once, on one of his random internet information rabbit holes.

One method needed a table. No such luck. One needed him to lie on the floor on his back. Not a good idea. If he was strong enough, he could yank on the arm, forward away from his chest. That might work?

A demon in black armor ran past him, a brute. They ignored him. A few more vrats joined the brute, wearing more black armor than the demons outside. Honor guard, or elite soldiers, or something? Whoever they were, if they didn't give a shit about a random human, even one apparently audacious enough to wear clothes, then maybe he could move around the tower without being bothered. Maybe—

The ground disappeared, sucked out from under him, and the wall he leaned back against lifted him up. No, wait, that was a gigantic hand lifting him by the throat, choking him, and pinning him against the wall a little too close to a remnant that grew from the ceiling.

“Who. Are. You?”

The demon came into view. Whoever they were, they'd been smart enough to grab David from the side around the entrance corner, and only now stepped into David's line of sight. It was the shark dinosaur demon, the eyeless one with the flat head, dragon snout, and the two big horns that came out sideways. Whoever he was, he was drenched in blood, more than when David had run past him a whole two minutes ago.

“Uck... uck...” Yeap, choking, not good. The demon loosened his grip. “I'm David! Just a... just... um...”

The nine-foot shark dinosaur clicked a few times in his throat. He sounded like Dao, except instead of sharp, pleasant clicks, it sounded more like a bass drum.

“You're... unmarked.”

Shit.

“I uh... I'm...”

“You're here looking for Mia.” He lowered David down to eye level, or snout to eye level, which still left David's feet dangling high. “You smell like her. Look like her. Unmarked.” He snorted, and a hot gush of air smacked David in the face. “Brother.”

“I...” Oh shit what to say what to say. “Everyone outside is too caught up to notice or care that the rider's in the spire! He's here for her!” Probably here for her, but no point in muddying the point now.

The demon snarled, a few clicks slipping into an animal sorta sound.

“You approach the spire now, of all times?”



“I’ve been trying to figure out a way in for the past week! I—” David caught his throat halfway through a yelp as pain shot up from his arm.

The demon grunted, clicked once, grabbed David’s wrist, and yanked it forward, away from David’s chest. And just like the time Jes had fixed it, the bone went forward, slipped around the outer groove of the socket, and back into place. Relief flooded David, and he relaxed in the grip still borderline choking him.

“Thanks.”

The demon tilted his head at the word. The girls had done that a few times, whenever David said it. They weren’t used to hearing it.

“The rider is in the spire?”

“Yes! Did no one notice when the dragon stood up?”

Again the shark dinosaur growled, and tightened his grip a little more than was comfortable. Okay, don’t poke the bear.

“Auras. Distracting.”

“Okay!” He patted the demon’s wrist with his good hand. “Okay, I get it!” After a few more painful seconds, the demon loosened his grip again. “The rider is here, and probably for Mia! I—”

“How do you know?”

“Because a whole bunch of crazy shit has happened to me! I’ve had run-ins with an invisible monster trying to kill me, angels, and the rider, too. He’s here for unmarked souls, me or Mia, to kill us or kidnap us, and I can’t let that happen!”

It really would have been nice if whoever this demon was had had eyes. His shark dragon snout thing didn’t have lips, and any facial expressions David managed to pick up on were just frowns the demon made with his cheek muscles at the base of his mouth. He could read an alligator’s facial expressions better.

“Mia and Zelandariel are deep in the spire, in the dungeon.”

“Dungeon?” Because of course the scary spire would have a dungeon.

“If you go down there, Zel might capture you, too.”

Slowly, wincing and groaning as his shoulder screamed at him, he lifted his injured arm and squeezed the demons' wrists with both hands as best he could. Might as well have been squeezing a steel beam.

"If I don't, the rider is going to get her. And I saw the rider kill a korgejin and a bunch of other demons, by himself, like they were nothing."

Mentioning the korgejin was enough to earn another grunt from the demon, and he put David down. Or rather, let David fall to the floor, and David slumped to his ass with the impact.

"Alright." And with that, the shark dinosaur walked to the edge of the balcony.

"Wait, what? Alright?"

"I'll go to her."

"Wait!"

The demon turned his head and aimed it over his shoulder at David, clicked once, and turned back toward the hole in the center of the spire. He had no intention of waiting.

David forced himself to his feet, and threw himself at the demon's back. Spiky, but he was used to dealing with spikes now, and he quickly found a groove between them where he could hold on to the giant demon by a couple of his shoulder spikes. And the demon had already been in the process of jumping down. Risky, jumping him like this. If the demon had fallen straight down the hole, it'd have probably spelled the death of both of them, but this demon knew where Mia was. By the sounds he'd made, he probably knew Mia herself. He was David's only hope of finding her.

"You—"

"Just get me down there!"

Not like the demon had a choice, already on the way down. But when they arrived at the next floor, the big dinosaur didn't throw David off. Any other demon would have, but whoever this demon was, they definitely knew Mia.

Miraculously, they didn't go full speed, either. David had seen his girls jump and move around with some pretty extreme velocity, more than enough to fuck up David's bad shoulder holding on. This demon hopped onto a chain, held his titanic weight with one hand, hopped down onto a cage, ignored the remnants inside, and hopped down to the next balcony, all just barely slowly enough that David didn't fall.

They got down ten floors before the demon stopped, just as David was about to ask for his name. But David's throat closed up, his breathing stopped, and his eyes locked onto the man standing in front of them.

The rider. He stood before them, small compared to the demon David held onto, but giant compared to David himself. A towering man, his armor must have weighed a hundred pounds, more, thick and solid gold and bronze, with red tint all over. His skull-like helmet pointed straight at them, and even this close, David still couldn't see through the T-slit opening.

He held his axes out at his sides, and they dripped with blood that popped, sizzled, and burned. The surrounding corpses burned, too, several demons, and a few souls.

David hopped off the demon's back, stood beside him, and stared at the rider. The rider stared back at him, skull helmet pointed straight at him, as if the massive demon dinosaur beside David didn't exist.

It was like standing in front of raging rapids. It poured over David, heat, rage, an aura of pure hate and desire to destroy. It boiled his blood. His hands shook with fear, and excitement. Adrenaline, or whatever the afterlife had, coursed through his limbs. The rider, silent as death, might as well have been an erupting volcano, an endless flowing river of pure ruination, completely at odds with the cold body language. Even as the battle above went on, noises so loud the roars and thundering footsteps reached the depths of the tower, they were nothing compared to being only fifteen feet away from the rider. A monolith of murder, anger, hate, who didn't even bother showing it in his demeanor, as if the concepts were so deep and ingrained into him, simply existing was enough to exude them.

He wasn't human.

"Boy," the demon said, "you said you were here for Mia?"

"Y-Yeah." David forced his eyes toward the demon, if only for a second. He was struggling, too, whole body flexing, tail quivering, claws twitching. The aura this rider put out felt so different to David's, but it didn't feel quite like the aura of a demon, either; David was pretty familiar with those now, after having run past a thousand of them.

"Stairs, down thirty more layers." The demon nodded toward one of the nearby archways in the wall.

"What?"

"Go. Warn her and Zel."

“Uh...” With a heavy gulp, David took a step toward the big hole in the wall. The archway above it was made of bone, and getting a little closer exposed the bone stairs going up and down. Thirty more floors? Going up that’d have been pure pain. Going down, no problem.

But he couldn’t go. The rider took one more step, and that was enough to put him in David’s path.

The demon mirrored the rider. He came closer, one step forward too, and put his big arm between David and the rider.

“Be careful,” David said. “Remember what I said this guy did to—”

“I remember,” the demon said, and he clicked once in his throat before he thudded his tail on the floor.

David wasn’t so sure the demon remembered. He was caught up in the rider’s aura, and ready to suicide against him, fight to the death, what all demons apparently loved doing.

“Why are you chasing us?” David risked a question. He needed answers almost as much as he needed to rescue his sister.

The rider said nothing.

“What’s going on? You have to know something! Why did Mia and me get sent to Hell?”

The rider said nothing.

“Why... just, why?”

Again, the rider said nothing. The rider didn’t move, either. The silence went long past the appropriate amount of time for a classic movie dialog exchange, and dipped into awkward territory. Was the rider confused, or shocked? Zero body language of any kind to read, not with all that armor, his almost statuesque posture, and the two axes unmoving at his sides.

But David couldn’t get to the stairway either.

A roar shattered the growing silence, and David covered his ears as the heavy sound ripped through the walls. It was enough to grab the nearby demon’s attention, and David’s, and even the riders.

A brute ran down the stairs, out from the archway opening, and straight toward the rider. A big brute. A big big brute, bigger than any brute David had seen yet, one with almost pure black skin. A juggernaut, no spikes or tail or wings, all claws and muscle, humanoid and almost grotesque with how thick, leathery, and demony his skin and face were.

Diogo. It had to be Diogo, the one Jes wanted dead. No wonder he was in charge of the Gorzen Mountains. The creature was as big as the demon David had just been riding, but the power that came out of him, the sheer aggression, it was enough to have even the rider shocked. For a whole half a second. But, half a second was enough time for the titan to charge into the rider straight on, and crash into him.

Big and heavy as the rider looked, Diogo's weight hit him hard enough to send him flying. The colossal man and his heavy armor smashed into the metal and flesh of the floor, rolled over the burning corpses, and collided hard with a distance bone wall. Diogo chased after him.

The rider got back up. He'd rolled hard enough David would have broken each limb, but the rider got up calmly and swiftly, and swung both axes down at the floor where Diogo's momentum was about to land him. But Diogo dug his talons in and jumped away at the last moment.

Jes was right. Brutes were absolute morons, but this Diogo demon, the biggest brute around, was smart enough to live where other brutes died. The rider came at him, swinging his big gold axes in almost an artful dance, and Diogo continued to back away, narrowly dodging each one as he looked for an opening. No need for David to explain, those axes set anything they hit on fire, and the burning corpses around them proved it.

"Go," the shark demon said.

"Wh—"

The demon leapt across the hole, a massive jump that almost smacked his head into the balcony above. Unlike Diogo, the shark dinosaur was perfectly comfortable moving on four limbs, and got behind the rider with the same sort of animal swiftness Caera used. He landed, used his momentum to keep going, pounced against the wall, and pounced off it straight at the rider's back.

The rider turned and swung an axe down, clean and fast, with zero hesitation. A giant demon much bigger than him jumping off walls didn't so much as warrant a flinch. And the only reason his axe didn't meet the shark on top of his flat, black bone head, was Diogo charging in again.

David didn't see what happened. Something new fell down the hole in the spire center, and a high-pitched squeak tore his eyes away from the fight.

"Mia?" He ran to the edge of the balcony and looked down. It couldn't have been Mia. The shark demon was sure she was already downstairs, and—

A woman, clutching a vrat's back, peeked up as the vrat took her down fast, hopping from chain to chain, balcony to balcony. Whoever she was, she was small, had long red hair, and wore some sort of

white clothing. But the vrat went down multiple floors almost as fast as gravity would take him, and became a blur in a second.

But David recognized that squeak.

He looked back to Diogo and the shark. They were both still alive, but the shark's right arm bled, and now Diogo was on the defensive again, stepping back and back as the rider came at him. The only reason Diogo was still alive was the rider wasn't exactly a bullet train. He didn't need to be, with an aura like that, demanding all inside it fight. All he had to do was slowly walk toward his target — or jog — and they'd throw themselves at him.

Not Diogo, though. He had enough presence of mind to keep from getting butchered, at least so far. No wonder Jes feared him.

David bolted for the stairs, and didn't look back. Thirty floors down? The shark demon had assumed Mia was down there, but she hadn't been. Maybe now, on the way down, she was going to where the shark demon thought she'd been?

And once he got to her, the fuck did he do? He had to find a way back to Jes, Dao, and Caera, and they were going to kill him for running off like that. Mia was with a demon, and the vratorin might get in his way. Then, of course, there was Zel, and if she was down there, the fuck could David do about her?

Fucking christ, what did he even run into this tower to do!? To stop the rider from getting to Mia. And now that he wasn't staring a giant battlefield in the face, and had a half second to think as his feet slapped the bone stairs underneath him, the stupidity of what he'd done sunk in. Yeap, running into the spire was the most idiotic thing he'd ever done.

The battle raged on above, both of them, and the giant dragon lizard's roars penetrated the depths of the tower. A few demons jumped up and down the hole, and souls ran up and down the stairs, but almost all the noise he heard either came from outside, or from the two demons and the rider fighting only several floors above his head.

The rider was coming for Mia. And now maybe for him. The fuck did he hope to accomplish?

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~~Mia~~

“Was that David!?”

“What?”

She squeezed Adron’s neck and shoulders tight and leaned in to his ear. Hard to do with him hopping down from floor to floor, chain to chain.

“My brother, David. I thought I saw him.”

“I saw another soul with red hair.”

“That might have been him!”

“He was on the same layer as the rider.”

“Oh fuck, I didn’t see that.”

“The rider was fighting Kas and Diogo.”

Mia squeezed harder. “What!?”

Adron paused on a dangling cage and took deep breaths. Even he was getting tired, going as fast as he was.

“I don’t know what they were doing there, or why, but they were fighting the rider.” Another deep breath. “Big guy, looked human, completely covered in aera armor, wielding two axes.”

“Oh god oh god.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Me!?”

He turned his head enough to look back over his shoulder at her. Never had the confident, playful, mischievous demon looked so lost.

“I don’t know what to do. Zel’s dead!” His voice grew louder.

“I—”

“Zel’s dead!”

She yanked her head back. “I...”

“You have no idea what you’ve done, do you? The battle outside, however many demons the rider and his troupe kill, it’s nothing compared to what’s going to happen when word gets out Zel’s dead.”

Adron was right. Little as Mia knew about Hell's politics, Death's Grip seemed to have some sort of tribal, barbarian system, or some cliché version of it. Three districts, whose leaders reported to Zel, and in those three districts, lots of demons formed their own groups. It was unorganized, full of infighting, and at the same time, a great way to keep everyone in Death's Grip strong and ready to fight at a moment's notice, without Zel having to spend every moment ruling like a micromanaging totalitarian.

It also meant if Zel died, the whole province would devolve into an orgy of violence with different groups each trying to secure the tower. And Zel had died.

Adron resumed the trip down, and Mia said nothing. What could she say? She'd killed Zel in self defense? Basically true. Besides, it wasn't like Adron was blaming her, just upset that now his entire world was shattered, his home was going to drown in violence and maybe get him and Hannah killed, and who knew what else.

"That's why you should come with me," she said, once they stopped at the floor with the dungeon. "And maybe even Kas, too, if we can convince him."

"Assuming he's alive."

She sucked in a breath between her teeth.

"I'll make things right, okay? I'm going to get Vinicius, and he'll protect me. I'll make him protect you, and David! And... and Kas. If he's alive." It took everything she had to not run upstairs to see if that really was David, or if Kas had died, but she needed Vinicius first.

Once they reached the dungeon, some demons gasped at the sight of her with the keys. A few of them groaned at her, eyes wide, desperate.

"I'll get you in a second! I have to get Vinicius first!" It took effort to not throw herself at them and try and free them.

Adron looked down at her, at the keys, at the nearby demons and souls that still drew breath, and rolled his eyes. If she'd been in a better frame of mind, she might have tried stabbing him with the keys for silently making fun of her and her empathy. Right now, all she could do was run past him, try and not look at the dead and the dying, and run through the vast hall that led to Vinicius's cell.

"Let's just get this done," he said as he jogged after her, "before the rider finds you. You're sure Zel's dead?"

"When I stabbed her, the amber horn stopped glowing," she said, half looking back over her shoulder. "She stopped moving, stopped breathing, and—"



Mia froze. Zel's body was still there, unmoving, horn still un-glowing. Vinicius was still bound to the wall, but someone else stood over Zel's body.

Acelina.

The busty demoness, nine feet tall and with a solid black, eyeless, featureless face, stared down at Mia with pure rage. Her arms flexed, her small tail flicked left and right behind her like an agitated cat, and her large, spindly wings flared wide enough to fill much of the large room. She bared her huge, white shark teeth in her wide, scary mouth, and they stood out almost beautifully against the obsidian canvas of her head.

“You! You did this!”

“I... uh...” Mia, squeezing the keys tight, backed away toward the door and hallway.

Acelina stepped toward her, and her hooves hit the metal floor hard enough the clop sound resonated. Her red silks, draped and hanging over her shoulders, threatened to fall off, but the tall demoness didn't care. After a couple of steps, she went from a fast walk, to an outright pounce.

Mia squeaked and jumped back, and Adron ran in front of her.

“Acelina, the fuck are you doing!?” Adron caught the woman by the shoulders and brought her forward momentum to a stop. Tall — and curvy — as Acelina was, and a foot taller than Adron, the vrat had a good amount of muscle to him, enough to stop the spire mother in her tracks.

“She killed Zel!”

“It was self defense. Zel was going to kill her.”

“I don't care if Zel was going to remove her intestines and use them as a sex toy on Saldavin!” Again, the tall demoness came for Mia. Again, Adron pushed her back. More than pushed her back, he gained ground. Slowly but surely, Adron moved the zotiva back against the side wall, and he pinned her there. Spire mothers weren't all that physically strong compared to other demons, apparently.

Auras were a different matter. It poured out of her like a tsunami, and Mia almost fell over as the urge to fight hit her. Fight, bite, tear, claw, do anything and everything she could to draw blood and inflict pain. She clenched her jaw, ground her teeth, and looked down at her hands before her eyes locked on the vratorin and zotiva.

No. Don't. Get the leash. Unlock Vinicius.

“Adron, do—”

Adron, still pinning Acelina against the wall, threw his glare over his shoulder at Mia instead, and struck her cold. He had murder in his eyes, rage, and bloodlust. Shit.

“Adron, we have to... resist...” Fucking god, the heat running through her veins was almost pleasurable. She wanted to meet Adron’s gaze with her nails, and claw out his eyes. She wanted to take the key in her hand and ram it through the softest part of his body: the throat. She wanted to... to...

“Fight,” Acelina said. “Fight. Rip each other apart. You want her heart, Adron. You want to taste her heart, the heart of an unmarked. You want to rip her open, shred her, devour her.”

Even with all the hate flowing out of the tall demoness, the words coming out of her sounded almost sexual. She probably would get off on seeing Adron rip Mia to bits.

“Adron!” Mia forced herself to stand up straight. She hadn’t even noticed she’d been in a hunched position, ready to pounce Adron and hopefully kill him and eat his heart before he could do that to her. “Adron, don’t... let her...”

“Adron? I—holy fuck!” A new voice. Mia and Adron both spun around. Hannah stood in the doorway, short blond hair a mess of sweat, and blue eyes wide.

Acelina’s aura faltered for a moment, long enough for Mia to rip her eyes away from the two demons. Get Vinicius. Don’t think about anything else.

With a heavy snarl, Adron shoved Acelina back hard, and the crack of her horns and skull hitting the wall vibrated through the room. She fell, and Adron’s snarl turned into a roar as he pulled back his claws.

“Wait!” Mia yelled as she snatched the tiny chain off the wall. A second later, it sat around her neck, Vinicius’s leash replacing the necklace she threw away.

“Wait?” Adron, standing over the stunned demoness, one hand clutching one of her bony wings and the other ready to cut open her throat, kept his glare on Acelina. Acelina’s aura had diminished enough Adron was no longer bordering on mindless, frothing-at-the-mouth rage, and smart enough to keep his eye on the spire mother.

“Wait. She’s just upset about what I did. She doesn’t deserve to die.” Mia you fucking idiot. If you leave her alive, you’re going to regret it.

Hannah came closer. “Uh, what’s going on? What—holy fuck! Again! Oh my fucking god is that Zel?” Jaw dropped, Hannah crouched down beside the dead demon and touched her shoulder. “What the fuck!?”

“Hannah,” Adron said, voice dipping into a deep register very much not like Adron, “why aren’t you in our room?”

“The door opened. All the teeth doors opened! Souls are running around like headless chickens, and—Mia what the fuck are you doing!?”

“Freeing Vinicius.”

“What!?”

Mia managed a quick smile for Hannah, before she got on her knees underneath Vinicius’s legs. The biggest key was the size of a small sledgehammer, and she had to use her muscles to get it into the hole. Click. She tried to twist, but it didn’t budge. She grabbed the flared end with both hands and twisted with every bit of strength she had. Click. It turned. The huge padlock holding the center chain down to the metal floor unhooked, and Vinicius rumbled as he leaned forward. Still locked up, chains latched onto the wall hooks.

“I really think we should kill her,” Adron said, a set of claws held to Acelina’s throat.

Somehow, the eyeless demon and her featureless black face — save for the large, deadly set of very sharp white teeth — looked to Adron, then to Zel’s corpse, then to Mia and Vinicius, all with... sadness? Frustration? Regret? Trying to read her expression was harder than Kas’s. But it was enough to let Mia know she’d feel sad for the rest of her life if Adron killed the demon. Because Mia was an idiot and let her empathy decide for her.

If David were here, he’d kill her for that.

“Don’t,” Mia said. “She’s a bitch, but she doesn’t need to die for us to get away.”

“She loved Zel, Mia. She’s not going to stop until you’re dead.”

An anchor wrapped itself around Mia’s heart and yanked her down into the metal floor. She’d known Acelina liked Zel, and worked for her of her own desire, but love? Adron might as well have cut Mia’s throat instead.

“Just... leave her alone, Adron, okay? I didn’t want any of this to happen, and I don’t want to kill anyone who doesn’t need to die.” She didn’t wait for his response. “Hannah, help me out.” With a hard gulp, Mia stepped around in front of Vinicius, grabbed onto one of the big spikes sticking out of his knee, and climbed him.

“Uh, what’re you—”

“The chains holding him are latched onto hooks! He might be able to shake them loose, but that could take time. Let’s just do this fast!” The faster they got it done, the faster they could get out of here, and the faster she could go check if that was David she’d seen.

It couldn’t have been David. No chance. She was a panicking mess and doing her best to stay afloat in the ocean, grabbing onto anything drifting in the water. But she was still going to check and find out.

Climbing Vinicius like a jungle gym was interesting. She had to be careful where she grabbed or put her feet because of the spikes, but his hard leathery skin was easy to grip, and she was light. Soon she was on his lower left arm, then his upper, and doing her best to ignore the demon’s dragon gaze as she half pressed her side into his thick neck, and grabbed onto where one of his arm chains hooked a wall spike.

“Lift your arm, high as you can,” she said.

Vinicius, after a tired rumble, did as she requested. A whole few inches of leeway to work with, with how the chains held him, and a few inches wasn’t much compared to how thick the chains were or how long the spikes they were hooked onto were. She had to use her muscles, and the small section of chain she had to lift weighed as much as she did. More.

Grunting and groaning like she was back in her dorm, doing her Sunday workout, she got her feet flat down against Vinicius’s shoulder, and lifted like she was doing a deadlift. All in the ass.

The chain link on the hook came up, up, up, until eventually it slipped over. The only thing that stopped her from plummeting backward and cracking her skull open on the metal floor was a little forethought. She held onto the chain, fell off Vinicius’s shoulder, and her chest planted into the front of the beast’s sternum as she dangled.

“Fuck, you okay?” Hannah asked, working on one of the lower chains around the giant’s legs.

“Yeap.” She climbed back up and got to work on the other chain. Two of them held Vinicius’s right arm, and maybe if she got them both off, he could help them out.

She wanted to peek down and see what Adron and Acelina were doing. Acelina was still alive, judging from the hisses and snarls, so at least Adron hadn’t killed her. It was damn weird, seeing the tall demon and her scary black void face complete with massive black horns, seem so distraught. Adron was right, she had loved Zel. Maybe that’s what her argument with Diogo had been about?

It was nice to know demons were capable of that emotion, at least. Except now she felt a thousand times worse because now she couldn't help but think about Acelina and Zel being romantic and lovey-dovey with each other, like Adron and Hannah were. Fuck.

She unhooked the chain binding the end of Vinicius's arm. Two slack chains dangled over the right arm now, both ends still connected to the binding chain behind him, but now that the padlock was undone and the chains off the hooks, they were loose. It was a very weird setup, something Zel probably put together because of Vinicius's size.

His top right arm fell, and dangled in front of him. As Mia climbed down the chain like a rope, Vinicius flexed the fingers of the free arm, like Mia sometimes did when she woke up with a numb arm. Hundreds of years not being able to move it more than a couple inches probably left him feeling like he didn't even have limbs anymore. Adron had said time didn't affect demons the same way as humans, but still, the relief Vinicius felt from being able to move his arm again after centuries of immobility must have been bliss.

Slowly, he lifted his hand to his head, and lifted the chain binding him off one of the hooks behind him. He did the same for the other, pulled it off his snout, and set it behind his head, behind the myriad of big black spikes.

Mia, back on the floor, stared up at him as the beast looked back down at her. Her muscles refused to stop shaking.

He opened his mouth. The quiet room grew deadly silent.

"Finally, I am free," he said.

Mia's jaw dropped again. Hannah's, too. That was a deep voice, deeper than Kas's, and gravelly in a way only an engine of destruction could be. Or someone who'd smoked cigars for forty years, and had a dump truck engine lodged in their chest. But there was a hint of rasp in there, too, a hiss, something almost serpent-like that mixed with the bassy rumble.

Adron and Acelina both stared up at him, too, though Acelina was the first to break the silence.

"He's going to kill and eat all of you," she said. "Zelandariel had him locked up for a reason."

"Zel was going to do worse to me!" Mia summoned some rage and launched it at Acelina with as much energy as she could find. Basically none. The moment she looked at the demoness, her slouching wings, and her collapsed posture, the rage vanished.

Hannah, on the other hand, didn't give a shit. She marched up to Acelina, one of her wings still bound in Adron's grip and his claws at her throat, and Hannah slapped the woman across her perfectly obsidian face.

"You are such a bitch, Acelina. So many times I wanted to kill you."

Acelina hissed, but all that earned was Adron pressing the tips of his claws to her throat.

The rattling of chains grabbed everyone's attention again as the goliath slipped more chains off their hooks with his free arm. Soon both his top arms were free, then his lower arms, and finally his waist, legs, and tail.

He was free. The twelve-foot giant was free. He took a step forward, and even trying to walk lightly, she felt the subtle vibration in the floor. One of his lower hands held his stomach over the bleeding hole, while his others found a wall. He leaned against it, and sucked in deep breaths as his colossal tail slowly swayed left and right behind him. Exhausted, and drained.

Mia touched the amber stone around her neck. She hadn't tested it, but it felt like the previous necklace. A little bit of intent, of focused will, and it'd trigger. The last thing she wanted to do at the moment. Vinicius could barely stand, and the reality of the situation hit Mia hard. How the hell could this demon protect her when he could barely move?

"Adron," she said, "how... how does someone become the new spire ruler?"

"Not sure. Something to do with that room Zel took you into, at the base of the spire."

The room with the giant castle made of bones. The book written by Lucifer himself. Something in there?

"So if we feed Vinicius Zel's heart, that won't happen?"

Vinicius aimed his red gaze at Mia, and rumbled again, a deep, pouring vibration that said one very specific thing: anger. He wasn't happy with the idea of Mia preventing him from becoming the ruler of Death's Grip. Well, too bad, that wasn't the deal.

"Do not touch her!" Acelina yelled, but her attempt to get up ended quick once Adron shoved her back down.

Hannah grinned down at the tall demon. From the look on her face, she would have happily killed Acelina and danced in her blood, a little too similar to the mental image Mia had of Zel giving into her own desires.

Mia gulped. "Vinicius, do it."

The titan nodded, and dragged himself along the wall toward the corpse of Zelandariel, queen of Death's Grip, spire ruler. She already had one of his spikes in her eye. If Mia hadn't been struggling to keep her growing nausea from making her pass out, she might have thought it fitting and poetic Vinicius got to rip open her chest and eat her heart.

Even the noises, the crunching bones and tearing flesh, were enough to put Mia between her need to vomit, and her unwanted desire to devour flesh, too. The taste of the demon heart Mia had eaten came back up, the memory of it, and it was delicious. Christ, she hated that. But worse was Acelina's scream that morphed into a tired whimper, as she watched Vinicius rip Zel open and eat her heart.

Hell was fucking horrible.

Vinicius's following rumble sounded downright pleasant, still incredibly deep and heavy, with a hit of a serpent's hiss, but with a sliding pitch like a human finishing a great meal. Mia forced herself to look at him, and found herself taking a step back as Vinicius's posture raised high. No longer supporting himself against the wall, one of his lower hands held the top half of Zel's corpse, one of his top hands held the lower half, and he licked his dragon snout as he admired his handiwork. One hand still held the hole in his gut, and the final, empty hand dripped with blood.

Acelina's rage was blatant. All she needed was her big, deadly set of sharp teeth bared against the backdrop of her obsidian, featureless face, to have Mia squirming. But Vinicius needed to eat.

"You didn't have to rip her in half," Mia said, and she forced herself to march up to him. Don't look at the body don't look at the body.

Vinicius looked back down at her and licked some of the blood off his huge teeth.

"She deserved it."

"I know, but that doesn't mean we should be horrible!" She didn't need her limited education in psychology to see Vinicius was going to be problematic.

He rumbled again, and the hint of darkness within the sound grew. But after a moment, his eyes fell on her necklace, and he let the two halves of Zel's body go.

Mia looked away in time to not see her insides splatter out of her.

"Okay, let's get out of here."

"And her?" Adron asked, gesturing to the spire mother.

"I said leave her."

Hannah raised a hand. “I don’t think—”

“Just leave her!” In the past, Mia would have stomped her foot, scrunched up her nose, and utterly fail at being intimidating. Now, she did neither. She set her glare on Hannah and Adron, and held their gazes as she clenched her jaw.

Hannah relented first and lowered her gaze as she nodded and walked Mia’s way. Adron followed a moment later, after giving Acelina one last hard glare and harder shove against the wall.

Acelina didn’t see any of this as mercy. Why would she? Demons were raised in a merciless environment, and none of the souls that came to Hell ever had any to share, either. The concept was foreign to her, a fantasy seen only in scrying pools.

“Okay, plan. We need a plan,” Mia said, and she headed back toward the dungeon. “I’m going to get out of here. Vinicius is going to protect me while I do that. And Adron and Hannah are invited. Kas, too.”

“We are?” Hannah asked, eyes widening.

“Yes! Of course! I have no idea what I’m doing, just that I need to get out of here and find my brother.”

“Brother?”

“Long story. Just, if you want to come with me, please do. I want you to come with me. Adron said things are going to get bad here, and... you’re my friends.”

Hannah and Adron traded looks. Seeing Adron shaken and unsure was doing a number on Hannah, and the poor girl was borderline panicking, same as Mia earlier. But be it because she trusted Adron, or ten years of being his slave had brainwashed her, Hannah waited for her master’s word on the matter.

“Yeah, we’re coming,” he said, and pulled a grin out of the uncertainty painted on his face. “I think we’re both getting attached to you.”

“I would hope so!” This time, Mia did stomp a foot and scrunch up her nose. “After all the things you two did to me!”

Surprisingly enough, it was Hannah who spoke up first. She stepped up to Mia, squirmed a bit, and slowly reached out and put a hand on hers.

“I was hoping we’d get to, uh, know you better, you know? And—”



“No time. Talk later.” Mia made for the cell exit, but managed a quick peek back at Hannah. The betrayer looked... excited? Happy? Terrified? All the panic emotions Mia had gone through five minutes ago. Whatever was going on in her head, she gave Mia’s hand a quick squeeze before she let go and rejoined Adron.

The hand squeeze said a little more than Mia expected it to, especially when combined with the lingering gaze Hannah gave her. Did she like Mia more than Mia realized? Adron gave Mia lingering gazes all the time, and she’d always assumed they were just flirtatious gazes. Was there something else going on there? Adron and Hannah traded another quick look before smiling at Mia again, and Adron winked at her. Okay yeap, no need for subtlety when Adron could just confirm things with a wink.

Adron and Hannah both stepped ahead of Mia and through the hallway back into the main area of the dungeon first. Vinicius followed. Acelina did not. Sobbing filled Vinicius’s old cell, or the demon version of angry sobbing anyway, a mix of snarls and half shrieks that died away.

Mia almost covered her ears. It was the last thing she wanted to hear, but she had work to do.

“Vinicius, close the door.”

The colossus nodded and shut his cell door behind them. It wasn’t locked, but at least she couldn’t hear Acelina anymore.

Mia ran up to one of the big metal cages, and tried one of the smaller keys she had. No good. She tried another, and nodded to the demon within as she felt something click in the padlock. The demon inside, crucified, stared down at her wide-eyed as she swung open the metal door of his cage.

“Uh, what’re you doing?” Hannah asked.

“He told me where the keys were. I’m going to release him. I—”

She spun her head. Movement in the dungeon hall exit drew her eyes, the sound of metal clinking on metal, footsteps, and something else. Armor.

Adron dashed forward toward the hall, and the monolith of gold and bronze armor walking down it toward them. Hannah turned to face it, too. Vinicius, still behind them, did nothing but watch.

A blur of movement came for Mia, something else that was bronze and gold. It spun through the air, like a frisbee tossed on its side, and bits of red flew off its edges. A wet frisbee, soaked in red water. Coming straight for her.

Someone's hand pulled on Mia's shoulder. Mia went down. Her keys scattered over the floor. Whatever the person in armor had thrown, it crashed against the metal door of the cage Mia had swung open, and it slammed into the floor beside her.

An axe. It landed against the floor just like it'd been thrown, vertically, and one of its blades — a double-sided axe — hit the metal floor hard enough it sank into it a sliver, enough it didn't fall over. The metal sizzled and popped as a fresh coating of blood boiled and steamed over its edge.

It'd landed an inch away from Mia's head. She rolled away from it with a squeak, and clutched her hair where it'd touched the blade. Fire ran up her hair, and her squeak turned into a shriek as she clutched it with both hands. The fire died fast, and she breathed relief as she looked back up at Hannah.

“What—”

Hannah turned her head, and looked down at her. Where'd she get one of those red silk sash things Acelina had? It dangled from her neck over her chest.

Mia froze. Ice returned and petrified her spine. Her lungs stopped working. Everything stopped working.

Hannah's hand held the side of her neck, and the deep gash that cut across it. Very deep. Even with her hand over it, Mia could see how the axe had cut through it by several inches, and had hit her collar bone before going past her into the cage door.

“Hannah...”

Hannah looked at her, eyes slowly coming to reality. She stumbled once, took a step forward, and looked to Adron.

“A... dron?”

A single moment, a sliver of time, and Hannah's eyes changed. Gaze still on Adron, Hannah took another step forward. The number on her forehead changed to 665, and she fell.

Her corpse went still beside Mia, and blood flowed from the huge, empty space between her neck and shoulder. The second woman to die beside Mia today.

“Hannah!”

Mia snapped her gaze back. Adron ran up to Mia, looked down at his pet, and changed. The whimsy drained from his eyes, and his demon brows furrowed with hate and rage Mia had never seen on him, or any other demon.

He reached down, did not look at Mia, and instead grabbed the long hilt of the axe. The grip hissed and smoked, burning his skin. He didn't care. With a roar that sounded all too similar to Kasimiro or even Vinicius, Adron ran down the hall toward the armored figure.

Whoever that was in the gold and bronze armor, they looked human, huge, and had a skull-like medieval helmet. The t-slit visor hid their face in shadow. Another axe waited in their other hand, and while Adron had a foot of height on the armored figure, they didn't move an inch as the huge demon brought the axe down with both hands. The armored figure blocked it with one.

"The rider," Vinicius said.

"The rider... Vinicius! Stop him!"

Vinicius slowly set his gaze on Mia, rumbled, and looked down the hall to his fellow demon. Hannah didn't even warrant a glance from him.

"No."

"No!?" Mia forced her eyes away from Hannah's paling skin and got to her feet. Don't think about it don't think about it. "Help him!"

"No."

"What do you mean, no!?"

"We're leaving. That's it."

"That's it!?" She marched up to the twelve-foot four-armed colossus and pointed a finger back at Adron while her eyes glared daggers into him. "If you don't help him, I'll use the leash!" This asshole was horrible! Worse than horrible! "He killed Hannah! He's going to kill Adron! Stop the rider!"

Vinicius glared down at her, and more rumbles flowed out of him, quiet bassy things that she felt more than heard. All she could hear was her own breathing, and the clang of metal from the hall. Adron screamed, roared, everything between, and brought the axe down onto the rider again and again and again. And when Mia looked his way, everything got worse again.

Adron made no progress. He got a few hits in, but they did nothing to the rider's armor. The rider continued to walk forward, swinging his axe with almost casual ease, and each attack forced Adron back. No matter his rage or the volume of his demon screams, the vratorin continued to lose ground against the rider.

The hallway was the only way out of the dungeon. With how unhurriedly the rider pushed forward, he had to know that, too. And he was coming for Mia. Coming to kill her. He'd thrown an axe at her. Almost killed her!

Hannah had saved her, and died for it.

"Please," Mia said, and she pounded both hands against one of the giant legs. "Please!"

He rumbled louder, snarled deeper, and set his dragon gaze on the hallway in front of him. He took a step back, one hand still clutching his gut. Before she could yell at him, or maybe use the leash, his free lower hand reached down and pushed her back into the hallway behind him. The door back to his cell at the end of the hall was closed, Acelina still inside, and Vinicius continued to push Mia back until she was safely in the hall.

His spikes began to glow.

"Vinicius!" she screamed, standing behind him. "What—" Heat hit her, waves of it that burned the air, warped the air, blurred and bent her vision, and she raised her hands to protect her eyes.

Hints of amber danced up the base of his spikes, highlighting the tiny, almost invisible grooves along the black surfaces. Symmetrical patterns of the deadly red and orange pulsed on the spikes, minuscule but in the hundreds, with each spike holding a couple dozen of the glowing dots along their undersides. They grew brighter and brighter, until they pulsed as bright as Zel's horn once did. Every spike glowed, from the enormous ones at the base of his giant tail and the massive ones along his back, to his horns that came up and back from his head.

A deep rumble poured out from his chest. It didn't sound like his usual voice or his usual rumbles, the few times she'd heard them. It sounded harsher. Was that crackling? Like... stirred embers?

Vinicius, horns almost hitting the ceiling of the giant hallway, pulled his head back, and forward again as he leaned toward the battle.

"Wait! Don't!"

That wasn't Mia's voice. It wasn't Hannah's. It wasn't Adron's. It was one of the demons in the big dungeon, the torture room, one of the few still alive.

Hell devoured the room. Not the Hell Mia had spent the past eight days in. True, real Hell. Fire that defied reason devoured, burned, and destroyed. It flowed out of Vinicius's mouth before spreading out, almost like an explosion, or a chemical that devoured the air and spread into it. Whatever it was, however it worked, Mia lowered her hands and stared past Vinicius's back at the wall of flames.

Not just flames. An inferno.

“W-Wait. Oh god, Adron. Adron!”

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~David~~

The rider jumped down the hole.

“What the—” David leaned over the balcony. How the fuck could someone wearing that much armor just... jump? The rider didn't move with any real acrobatics, or at least David hadn't thought he did from the little he'd seen of him. But somehow, the huge man landed on one of the balconies below David, and then stepped off it with casual familiarity to land on a dangling cage below. The chains that held the remnant-filled cages were thick and heavy enough they could hold something or someone much larger than the rider, and they rattled with impact as the rider jumped from one to the other.

His axes were on his back, and a fresh layer of blood sizzled on their blades.

“Oh fucking shit.”

The rider looked up, and David yanked his head back. Did he see him? No. The rider continued down, more chains rattling and giving him away. Had he seen David on the way down? Probably. But he kept going anyway, to get to Mia. He knew David was coming.

David risked another peek over the balcony. The rider continued down further, further, and hopped off onto a balcony and stayed there. Probably the floor Mia was on.

David looked up. Diogo, and the big shark demon with the flat head, were they alive? Hopefully Diogo was dead, so Jes and Doa would be happy. The shark guy though? He'd helped David, sorta, and he'd known Mia's name. Judging from his reaction, he knew Mia well and actually wanted to help her. Hopefully, he was still alive.

Part of David wanted to go back up and check. A much larger part of him kicked himself in the ass, and got running again, taking five steps at a time down the bone stairs. Get to Mia before the rider did, warn her, maybe stab the rider with his useless broken sword, anything! Figure out the details when you find her! That's what Mia would do.

Screams and roars continued above. The fighting had spilled into the spire from outside, or maybe the fighting was done, and Death's Grip's demons were all returning and had figured out the rider had gotten into the tower. They should have earlier, would have, if they weren't all so lost to their sin auras.

Must go faster. Must go faster.

Twenty-eight. Twenty-nine. Thir—

The huge metal doors on the other side of the inner, circling balcony, already partly open, swung open hard, and someone flew out of them, followed by a wave of fire. More than a wave. A maelstrom. Searing heat poured out over the balcony and broke apart like a splitting sea, and the amber waves crashed around and flowed down over the balcony as much as they shot upward with heat. David had to step back into the stairway to keep from getting hit by the flames.

They didn't last forever. Ten seconds later, the flames died down, and David peeked his head back up over the bone stairway he now lay on. The fire vanished, but some of the heat remained.

A vratorin sat on the balcony, behind one of the two open metal doors. The fire blast had pushed it open, and the demon must have used it as a barrier.

David sucked in a breath and moved toward the vratorin. Whoever they were, they weren't dead. Breathing, even panting, and eyes wide with pain. Eye. Half their body looked burned, some parts lightly, some parts quite a bit, including a chunk of the left side of his face, eye included. The eyelid was closed, but opening it would have just exposed the ruined flesh underneath, if he even could open it.

The vrat was big compared to other vrats, eight feet tall, and wore a few pieces of black armor. Judging from his size and the fact he hadn't been outside fighting with the rest, he was someone Zel considered important.

"Mia?" David whispered, squatting down beside the demon. "Where is she?"

Holy fuck, the poor guy. He must have been boiling with agony. But even as he twitched a few times, and his long tail jerked and tightened in a few spasms behind him, he aimed his remaining eye at David. Awareness dawned on him so clear it left David frozen.

"You're Mia's brother." He didn't whisper, but his voice was quiet, and exhausted.

"Yeah. She in there?"

"Y... Yes."

"And the rider? He in there?"

“Yes.”

David shivered, nodded, and gripped his tiny useless sword tight. His left arm was a massive dislocation risk, and even spinning too hard would probably pop it out of the socket until it healed properly. What chance did he have against the rider?

The sword wasn't completely useless. He'd killed a riiva satyr with it. If he tightened his shoulder up, he could move fine. If he was careful, his bare feet allowed him to walk on the — now very hot — metal floor silently. Sneak attack was his best option.

“Where'd all that fire come from?”

The demon sighed as his head leaned back against the wall of metal and bone. Fucked up as he was, he still had enough presence of mind to do it gently as his horns rested against the surface.

“Vinicius. Mia's new pet.”

“New pet?”

“He spat out the fire, trying to kill the rider.”

“Jesus christ. Did it work?”

“No.”

After a heavy gulp, David pulled his eyes away from the half burned demon, and crept around the door enough to peek into the hall.

The rider stood there, walking deeper into the room, a large dungeon, as he picked up one of his axes from the floor. With both in hand again, he stepped into the room of fire and death, and headed toward the open doors in the back, where a four-armed demon waited for him that made every tetrad David had seen so far look tiny. He wasn't a tetrad. And Mia stood behind him.

She was alive, thank god. Alive, and according to the demon next to David, the big guy with four arms was someone named Vinicius, and Mia's new pet?

The smell was horrible, more of that burnt flesh smell that should have made him nauseous and want to vomit, but didn't quite do that, which made it worse. Demon corpses, human corpses, all trapped in metal and bone cells, or trapped in bone chairs, or crucified to metal walls, all waited inside the large dungeon room. All of it burned, only the metal withstanding the heat. The bones burned like wood, and the corpses inside sizzled and popped.

Mia, her head peeking out from behind Vinicius's leg, looked beyond horrified. She was far, features lost in the blurring of the heat waves and the length of the dungeon, and the sweat dripping into David's eyes didn't make it any easier to see her. But he could tell from the way her big green eyes looked out at the carnage before her, she was traumatized. Whatever had just happened, in classic Mia fashion, she either blamed herself for it, or took a personal stake in it.

Hopefully, her state of shock would mean she didn't give him away.

David slipped one foot around the door, and—

"You didn't come for me, old friend," Vinicius said with a voice like a T-Rex had just ground gravel in his throat. He took a step forward, one of his lower hands clutching his side, and a subtle glow in his spikes faded away, the same shade as the fire that burned in the dungeon around the rider.

The fire didn't bother the rider at all. He walked forward, both axes in hand and relaxed at his sides, half dangling in half loose grips.

"No," the rider said. He sounded... normal. He sounded like a man. Maybe a big strong guy with a naturally deep voice to go with, but it had none of the crazy bass gravel of Vinicius. Even David's girls had bigger voices, higher pitched being girls and all, but they still sounded demony. The rider sounded completely, entirely unimpressive.

All that did was make the sight of him, slowly and steadily walking through the flames, past the burning corpses and bone and metal cages, all the scarier.

Vinicius moved into the burning room, a slow prowling motion. Even with one hand clutching his gut, his motions were smooth and predatory. Might as well have been a literal dragon prowling around with how big the demon was. He didn't lean forward as much as a dinosaur, not like the eyeless one David met earlier, but he still moved with the animal posture of a hunting creature. And his dragon eyes stared at the rider with so much focus, he didn't notice David at all.

"Your armor continues to resist my flames," Vinicius said.

The rider said nothing, but he did come to a stop. Almost like he was waiting, he stood there and let his axes dangle in his hands while Vinicius came closer, until both juggernauts stood in the center of the flames and ruins of what had once been a gigantic dungeon. The flames had been hot enough the burning corpses were mostly ashes now, and the cages and chairs made of bone fell apart as the splintering white snapped like beach pebbles tossed into a campfire. Black metal bars remained, standing in the flames, surrounded by death.

"Give me the unmarked," the rider said after an eternity.



“You want to kill her.” It wasn’t a question.

The rider didn’t twirl an axe, shift weight from side to side, anything to suggest there was any sort of personality inside his shell. Just a man, a monolith, on a mission. But even from a distance, David could feel the odd mix of rage and hate pouring out of him, an aura that demanded violence and murder. The searing heat of the flames matched the heat of his fury, and the ashes of the surrounding dead matched the strange coldness that mixed with it. It was murderous hate David’s brain could only understand as frigid ice and searing lava.

“Yes.”

Vinicius snarled as he slowly shook his head. “You know I won’t let you.”

A pause, neither moving. Only the crackling of the burning bones in the wide dungeon hall, the giant demon’s labored breathing, and the demons from outside pouring down the balconies above made a sound.

David crept forward. With that helmet, the rider could only see directly in front of him, so sneaking up beside him toward Mia could work. Then again, the rider probably had superhuman senses or some other bullshit. Or maybe he could sense David’s presence? No, he’d come within several feet of David before, on his big goort mount, and hadn’t found him. Just keep going.

Problem. The dungeon was still on fire. Heat poured up through the air, blurred his vision, and sweat flowed down his body. Running through it would be pain, and his bare feet would get burned.

Mia, whose eyes had been scattering around on the rider, Vinicius, and everything else in the dungeon, finally looked David’s way as some flames settled. Her eyes opened even wider, and she opened her mouth. David shook his head, and risked a small, low wave of his fingers, the way he usually greeted his sister when they spotted each other in random places outside their dorm.

Even from a distance and through all the heat haze, her big eyes and body language spoke loud. She looked relieved. But when she took a step forward, she ran into the same problem he did. They couldn’t go through the dungeon while it was this hot, not easily anyway.

David crept closer. He was now in official heat exhaustion territory; not a difficult temperature to reach for a couple gingers who lived in Canada their whole lives. Ghost salt from ghost sweat soaked his lips and reached his tongue. Thankfully, the few bits of armor he wore made no noise compared to the heavy clinks of the rider walking closer to Vinicius. If David could keep pushing forward, he could reach his sister. Bigger problem: doubtful there was an exit where Mia was. She had to come to him, not the other way around.

“You’re wounded,” the rider said.

Vinicius snorted, almost like one of Caera’s half laughs, just a thousand times deeper and heavier.

“That won’t stop you, will it?”

The rider raised his axes.

“No.”

The rider came at him. Someone wearing that armor should not have been able to move that fast, but the gold and bronze layers of metal did little to stop the man from leaping at Vinicius with both axes up.

Vinicius stepped aside, and spun. He was a gigantic monster of a demon, and like Caera, had a thick tail, as thick as one of his tree trunk legs. Spikes covered the tail’s back, and unlike Caera’s, they didn’t look like they had any give or bend. Perfect for skewering.

The colossal wall of dark red skin and black spikes smashed into the rider’s front and side, and the rider brought his axes down. The gold blades hit, but the impact sent the rider back and to the side, hard. A couple of gashes now ran down the sides of the monster’s tail, but shallow, barely bleeding, while the rider flew and hit one cell with metal bars. They bent inward like a streetlight bending to a car crash.

The rider said nothing, no grunts or groans, no heavy breaths. He got back up and faced Vinicius, only to meet the monster head-on as the titan charged toward the rider. One hand clutching his gut left the monster with three, and all three of them reached out for the rider.

Mistake. The rider wasn’t wounded, or even disoriented. Flying and crashing that hard into a wall would have killed any soul, and turned their brain into a pancake inside their skull. But the rider swung one of his axes up, caught Vinicius on the underside of one of his arms, and used the momentum of the axe to spin, and swing the other axe up as well. Vinicius yanked one of his other arms back again, but the second swing caught him deeper in the arm, more than just a graze.

But Vinicius had more than just claws. He swung his head down and to the side, and drove his huge horns into the rider. Most of Vinicius’s horns pointed up from his head, but a couple came out from the sides and forward with a bit of curve, big enough the demon could hit and stab with them. Case in point, his head swing came from the side, and smashed into the rider’s helmet.

David braced to see the rider's helmet come off. It didn't. The armored titan fell to his side, and one of his axes came out of his hand. Vinicius and the rider both looked toward the axe as it skidded along the floor, and came toward David.

The axe stopped in front of David. Everyone froze. God had a sense of humor.

“Vinicius!” Mia yelled. “Don't let him hurt David!”

And now they knew his name. Wonderful. It probably didn't matter, but still, he frowned at her and hoped she could see it through the hazy air.

He also put his tiny sword in his bad hand, and tried to pick up the axe with his good hand. His palm got within an inch of the grip before the heat told him what would happen if he grabbed it, and he yanked his hand back in time.

The rider got up. Vinicius raked down with his claws, but of his three available arms, one was bleeding, the other was bleeding buckets, and the rider was ready for the good arm. He swung up with his axe, and Vinicius pulled his arm back in time to keep his hand. He'd seen the attack coming. But the rider jumping up to Vinicius's head, and punching his huge dragon snout with his free hand, was not something Vinicius saw coming.

Vinicius fell back. The room shook with the impact of his mass colliding with the floor. The ashes of corpses filled the air, giant bones that'd yet to snap from the heat shattered, and metal cages bent and crumpled.

The rider might have been able to follow it up and jump the demon, go for the kill, but it'd have been risky. No, the rider had a different aim, and he went for it. He wanted to kill the unmarked. And he wanted his axe back.

“You uh... should get a chain for this thing,” David said, backing up. “Use it like a rope or—”

The rider ran toward him, a juggernaut of mass and strength that bulldozed through flames. Mia screamed. Vinicius roared as he got back to his feet, but the rider closed the distance to David in seconds.

David did the first thing that came to his mind, that'd come to anyone's mind when an enormous man wearing thick gold and bronze armor complete with a medieval great helm shaped like a skull comes running at you. He ran, too, in the opposite direction. Maybe the rider would stop and turn around once he got his axe back?

Nope. The rider picked up the axe, and resumed coming toward David with an unfair running speed. Why switch targets and go for David? Because Mia was trapped in the dungeon, and he could go for her after he cut David to bits. Shit.

Well, at least the rider's attention wasn't on Mia anymore. Double shit.

David didn't have to go far to get out of the dungeon's entrance hall and back to the inner balcony, and he skidded to a halt before almost falling over the edge into the spire's center hole. If that shady black area he saw was the bottom, it looked deep enough he'd splatter if he jumped.

He spun around again and faced the rider. The vrat still hid behind one of the big metal open doors, but a glance was enough to tell David whoever this demon was, he was out of commission. He wouldn't be helping.

But the vratorin did look up, past David and to the balcony above and behind him. In the increasingly loud chaos, the vrat's quick glance was the only warning David got. David threw himself to the side, and a blur of mass came down onto David's balcony with a heavy thud.

Diogo hit the metal floor, dove past David, and with his one remaining arm, slammed his giant fist into the rider's face.