

~~David~~

He woke up in a cave. That was happening a lot. What wasn't happening a lot was doing that in the middle of the day, when the fire sky burned bright and even the depths of caves got some reflected light in them. Their cave wasn't all that deep, and even with the sky out of sight around its curving insides, the amber lights didn't have to fight hard to keep it well lit with all the ambient light. It felt weird waking up in the middle of the day in Hell, like waking up after a nap gone wrong in the real world.

Groaning, he pushed himself up to sitting. Tried to, anyway. Dao gently pushed his head back down, right onto her lap, and he blinked up at the eyeless demon as she smiled down at him. Her claws combed through his shaggy red hair, her other hand against his chest beside the half breastplate. She clicked at him a few times. Stay down.

"Feeling okay?" Caera asked. "We weren't sure you were gonna wake up." She lay a few feet away, long body aimed at the cave path out, but she turned her head to face him.

"I... yeah, I feel fine. How long was I out?"

"About an hour," Jes said. She sat beside Dao, and grinned down at him as she poked his forehead with a claw. "Wanna explain?"

"Explain?" He tried to sit up again. No go. Clicking softly, Dao shook her head as she pushed him back down.

"Yeah, explain," the gargoyle said. "You're unmarked. You have an aura—that Caera says changed for a second when you were fighting by the way. A giant invisible... thing, is out to kill you. You can read the ancient language no one can read, not even spire rulers. And apparently you pass out when eating human hearts?"

He blinked. Right, the human heart. Right, the flood of memories that hit him when the person's flesh... the person's resonance, had hit him.

"Caera," he said, turning his head to look at her, "you... said humans can't absorb resonance, right?"

"Only demons can absorb resonance. We turn it into essence, the fuel we — and you — use to do stuff."

"Like a digestive tract turning food into fuel for our bodies to burn off."

She shrugged. “Close enough. But like I said, humans can’t absorb resonance. You have your own resonance that you can never burn, so you need essence directly, which hearts have a lot of, too.” After a big stretch that forced him to suppress the urge to say ‘ooh big stretch’, Caera sat up. “What’s that go to do with you passing out?”

“You... fed me the heart of the woman I killed, didn’t you?”

She raised a brow, and prowled closer. “How’d you know that?”

Fuck. Fucking fuck fucking fuckity fuck. Why? Why was all this weird shit happening to him? The fuck did he do? He was just a regular guy!

Apparently not.

“I saw... her sins, I guess. Took me so off guard, I guess I fainted. Fainted pretty hard, if it took me an hour to wake up.”

The demons all blinked. Even Dao somehow managed it, despite the lack of eyes, and she clicked a few times, high pitched but soft.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I ate the heart Caera gave me, and then I was... I was her. The woman. I pushed someone into traffic. I saw some quick flashes of other things, too, other things she did. Noises. Scents and tastes. I remember what the person’s shoulder felt like.” He closed his eyes. “I’m guessing demons don’t experience that when they eat the hearts of people, or demons.”

“Uh, no, they don’t,” Caera said. From the sound of her voice, she’d leaned in and was now examining him from up close. He kept his eyes closed, and tried to focus on Dao’s fingers combing his hair and caressing his head. “You’re really not human.”

“I’m starting to believe you.”

“That is pretty fucking weird,” Jes said. “That... I mean, that does sound like you absorbed something about her. But even if you absorbed her resonance, that wouldn’t make you see her past. Jesus fucking christ, why are you so... unique? What’s going on?”

All he could say to that, was nothing. He just shrugged. Had he absorbed the woman’s resonance, the thing about her that determined whether she went to Heaven or Hell? Considering the flashes had obviously been some of the really shitty things she’d done in her life, that made a little sense. Something about him allowed him to see why their resonance was the way it was? But humans didn’t absorb resonance!

Fuck. Another nail in that coffin. He wasn’t human. Double fuck.

“I don’t have a clue,” Caera said. “I’ve never read about anything like this. I mean, maybe there are runes in the deepest places in the spires that might know more? Or maybe at False Gate or the Forgotten Place?”

He opened his eyes. “Why those places?”

“Lots of old, important shit deep in the spires I’ve never seen, so who knows about those places. The Old Ones and Lucifer also did a lot of their shit in the Forgotten Place and False Gate. They were important places. False Gate for the vortex, but no one knows much about the Forgotten Place.”

“Lucifer? The Old Ones? What do they have to do with me?”

“Fuck me, I don’t know. But this is some weird shit, David, like breaking all the rules of Hell and Heaven weird shit. If anyone has any idea about what’s going on, it’s the Old Ones and Lucifer. And far as anyone knows, they’re dead. The only idea I have, is maybe some of the lower areas of spires we’re not allowed to go to, or False Gate or the Forgotten Place. Maybe they wrote something down, something... only you, and probably your sister, can read.”

“That’s a pretty wild shot in the dark.”

“Got a better idea?”

He took a deep breath. “Then I guess when I get Mia, that’s where I’m going.”

Caera snorted. “I told you I’ve never entered the False Gate province, David. I like being alive. And no one knows how to cross the sea to the Forgotten Place. Not anymore.”

“Then I guess I got a lot of work ahead of me.” He pushed against the ground. The tone of his voice probably told Dao to let him up, and she did. He smiled at her. “Cause, I mean, you’re right. A lot of crazy shit is happening and I don’t understand any of it and... and... I can’t have that.”

Jes raised a wing claw. “Can’t have that?”

“Can’t have that. I can’t not know. Something is going on with me, and I can’t not know. This has to do with how I died, right? The strange way I died, the strange thing that happened at the Gate of Heaven, the strange... everything! Something’s happening, and I have to know! I have to figure out what’s going on, so things can make sense!”

They slowly looked between each other before him again, Caera and Jes with raised eyebrows like he was a crazy person.

“David,” Caera said. “You—”

“You can’t tell me you don’t want to know. You made me eat that heart to keep me alive at all costs, remember? You’re desperate to read more of those runes.”

“Not so desperate I’ll die for it.”

He squinted at her. She squinted right back.

“I’m not going to let this go,” he said. “I have to find out. I have to know. I have... I just have to.” How could he explain? It wasn’t the first time he ran into this wall, and it was like trying to communicate with someone who didn’t speak his language. It was written into his bones. He had to know, be it why he was unmarked and in Hell, or why his computer lagged an extra few seconds when opening a random program. Stay up all night, no sleeping, no eating, and all-consuming need to know that sank into him until he was searching online for answers for multiple days straight, until Mia demanded he take a shower and eat something.

He knew that about himself well enough. But apparently he didn’t know much, if he wasn’t even human. He had to know.

“You’re going to get yourself killed,” Jes said. “You can do that after Diogo’s dead.”

He grinned at her. “Of course.”

Dao clicked a few times, but sighed after a while and patted his shoulder.

Everyone got quiet after that. No need for a translator. Dao didn’t want him to go.

He smiled at the satyr as he slid in to sit beside her, back to the wall, and leaned against her good shoulder. Her leg and arm looked a lot better, still swollen but healing. Jes’s wing looked better too, and her ankle. Demons healed crazy fast once they had some food in them.

“How long till we’re good to go?” he asked.

“Two more rekindlings at least,” Caera said. “More, if Dao and Jes need to fight anything. And Mia’s probably already at the spire.”

“Can we get eyes on the spire? Maybe get to a spot where you and I can at least see it?”

“Yeah, sure. Tomorrow.” Nodding, Caera prowled over toward the entrance, and slid something along the ground toward him. It scrapped the stones, making a very unpleasant noise. A black sword, its blade and handle big chunks of metal beaten into shape, literally. It was like a giant with a mallet had grabbed a bunch of chunks of metal and smashed them together, with zero smithing skill or anything. It didn’t matter. A sword was a sword and as long as it didn’t break, it didn’t matter how shitty it looked.

Problem. He wanted to break it.

Groaning, he got up, and grabbed the big hilt with both hands, and—

“Damn.” He stumbled, rocking back and forth slightly with the blade held up. “I’d... kinda hoped...”

“Hoped what?” Jes asked

“I dunno. Apparently I’m not human, so I’d kinda hoped after eating a heart, maybe I’d be stronger? Demon strong?” Nope, not happening. He let the sword’s tip fall, and it clanked against the rocks hard enough to leave a dent. Not stronger, or different in anyway he could tell. Damn. So much for that fantasy. “Alright. I’m gonna need help breaking this.”

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~~Mia~~

“P-Please don’t eat me.” It was out of her mouth before she could stop it.

Zel chuckled. Giggled? It was more feminine than her tall, alien, elegant body and face looked like it’d make.

As Zel stepped toward her, Diogo stepped aside, bowing slightly again for the tetrad demon. The ruler of the Death’s Grip spire squatted down in front of Mia, and was still taller than her, four giant black horns a crown on her head, with the amber, glowing horn sticking up from the top of her forehead, between the four others. The thin tall body, the four arms, the hooves and lack of tail or wings, it definitely made her look distinct. The fact she was almost a foot taller than Diogo, the biggest demon Mia had seen so far, only made things worse.

She was beautiful. Seeing her up close, too close, didn’t change that. She did have a nose, but it was subtle, almost completely flat to her face with two tiny nostrils barely noticeable. It gave her face a smooth, almost mask-like alien quality.

From underneath her giant horns, long black tendrils dangled from her skull, like Adron’s except a bit thicker, and pierced horizontally with tiny bones up and down their lengths. They weren’t the only bone decorations on her body. While she only wore a few pieces of white sheer silk, nothing more than

long scarves that only casually and accidentally covered her moderate breasts, she had what looked like a belly chain under her long set of abs, and a few skulls dangled from it. The chain was made of black metal. She wore a necklace, too, the same sort of skinny black chain, and it had a few skulls dangling from it as well. Some were human, some were demon.

“And what is your name, unmarked one?” Just like her laugh, her voice was quite feminine, and soft, and elegant, and playful. It was almost like the sort of voice a bitch in high school might use to manipulate someone, while pretending to be kind and sweet and innocent.

“M—”

Diogo got a fraction of a second into the word, before Zel shot him a look, shutting him up instantly. Holy shit.

“Mia,” Mia said.

“Mia. What brings you to the center of my kingdom?”

Mia blinked at her, and looked up at Diogo. The brute stood there, said nothing, and glared down at Mia. Enough said. Lying was not a good idea.

“Diogo noticed I was unmarked, and thought you... might want to see me.”

Zelandariel nodded, red and black eyes staring straight into Mia’s soul. “I see.”

“And... because, apparently, I... have an aura.”

The demoness raised a dark eyebrow before standing back up. God, she really was taller than Diogo. Mia’s head barely reached the underside of her hip.

“Diogo,” she said, eyes still on Mia, “describe this aura to me.”

“Similar to a vola’s aura. It became problematic when she nearly fucked Adron. It’s a... very powerful, very wide aura.”

Mia squirmed. Zel didn’t so much as glance Diogo’s way anymore. Like a scientist analyzing a pet project, or maybe a dominatrix watching her sub squirm, she kept her eyes on Mia, one set of arms folded across her chest, the other resting on her hips.

“A sexual sin aura, from a human? And an unmarked human at that. How interesting. You were wise to bring her to me, Diogo.” Nodding, Zel reached down with one of her lower arms, and set a hand on Mia’s shoulder. Long claws. “I knew strange things were afoot, but I did not expect them to manifest in such an unusual way.”

“Strange things?” Mia asked. The harsh glare Diogo threw her was like a slap to the face. She wasn’t to talk unless spoken to.

But Zel just laughed and shrugged. “Quite the tongue on you.”

Mia gulped. Yeah, a stupid tongue, and it was probably going to get her killed if she didn’t get control of it. The spikes outside were not a pleasant memory she was keen on revisiting.

Again Zel laughed, and guided Mia to turn around and follow her as Zel walked past her and Diogo, one hand and its long claws still on her shoulder.

“You may go, Diogo,” Zel said. “You will be rewarded for your efforts, and may enjoy my comforts for a few days. I assume you’ll wish to see Acelina before you leave?”

Diogo snorted, but nodded, posture relaxing as he followed behind.

“I do.”

“You know she does not wish to speak with you.”

“I’ll be... careful.”

Mia forced down the bubbling urge to ask. Acelina? Diogo’s romantic interest? Did he have a romantic interest? Was he capable of romantic interest? Maybe just a friend? He seemed less likely to have friends than maybe a girlfriend.

Did demons have girlfriends and boyfriends?

Zel walked them out of the throne torture room and back out onto the inner balconies of the spire, but guided her into another archway, a metal one lined in black teeth. If anyone so much as nudged Mia into the archway’s frame, it’d tear her arm open. Diogo didn’t follow, choosing a different path.

She sucked in a hard breath as the archway took them out onto an outdoor balcony, one of the ones she’d seen from outside. It circled the spire, and its width was probably fifty feet across. She was right, the outer edge was tipped with giant, white, sharp teeth, and now that she was on the balcony she could see the teeth came out of chunks of pulsating flesh that grew over the metal, and connected to the spire.

“Is this spire alive?”

Zel grinned as she looked down at her. Shit, she talked again.

“How long have you been in Hell, fresh meat?”

An insult, and no answer to her question, ugh. Don't frown. It was just a couple words demons often used to describe her, and probably any human.

"This is day four."

"You were lucky Diogo and his servants found you. Most fresh meat is dead within the first three days of their arrival. Many within the first three minutes."

She groaned and nodded, and followed the tall woman toward the edge of the balcony. She couldn't mention her brother, ask about him, anything, unless she wanted him to end up like her, captured. Whether that was better than being dead, she didn't know yet.

If Zel had two unmarked humans in her grip, the demon might think it worth sacrificing and eating one of them to see if she gained any power from it. Not good.

"I guess. I..." Her voice trailed off, and she stared out from the balcony.

Holy shit she'd climbed high. It'd been horrible, going up those stairs, but now she was damn high, almost as high as some of the mountain tops, and some of those mountains were fucking colossal. Not Mount Everest colossal, but still. She could almost see over the mountains clockwise around Hell, and could easily see over them counter clockwise, to some place called The Black Valley. It was certainly black. She could even see over it, and to the horizon.

It wasn't a horizon. It was an endless, blurry distance, merging, gradients of red mixing with fire. It was beautiful, and horrifying.

She gulped and stepped back as she clutched her stomach.

"Tell me, unmarked one, how did you die?"

"I..." Oh god, what to do? How the fuck should she answer her questions? Fucking shit where was David. He'd know what to do. He'd have already had the conversation in his head a thousand times, and had come up with some 4D chess strategy to say the right thing and not get himself killed.

Lying was dangerous, and with Zel knowing Mia could create an aura, she couldn't just pretend to be a normal human anyway.

"I died randomly," she said. Fuck it, for all she knew this warlord of a ruler would be her strongest ally. "Just, randomly."

"Randomly?"



“Yeah. I was sitting at my table eating breakfast, and then I was in pain. Ten or twenty seconds later, I was dead. Doctors couldn’t figure out what killed me, either.” Dodging saying ‘us’ was proving difficult.

“That is quite strange. When was this?”

“Uh, almost three weeks ago? I guess twenty days, yeah.”

Zel nodded as she came closer to the edge, and closer, before motioning for Mia to join her with one of her four hands. Wincing, Mia joined the ridiculously tall demon, and stared out over the balcony to the fall below. One of the big white teeth sticking up from the balcony proved to be her saving grace, and she pressed both hands against the tall fang, holding on as she looked down.

The spikes and burning skulls on the ground weren’t placed randomly. They were spread out around the tower in a perfect circle pattern, dozens of circles that circled the spire, something you could only notice when looking straight down at it from above. It was beautiful and horrifying, like everything in Hell apparently was, Zel included.

“Something has been amiss, Mia. Something strange spreads through Hell. The angels visit frequently, flying high where I cannot reach them. They are worried. And they are looking for something.” The demon smiled down at her, exposing some of her fangs in her small mouth. Small for her head, anyway, but considering how big she was, still more than big enough to bite Mia’s face off.

“You think they’re looking for me?”

“I do not know. Perhaps. Something is happening in Hell, fresh meat. Imps and grems have whispered of strange movement in the Black and Grave Valleys, no doubt stirred by the angels and their investigations. Whether that is because of you, or you are simply another symptom of these changes, I do not know, yet. The angels increased their activity about twenty days ago, which is when you died. But since you have only been in Hell for four, I assume you remained a ghost on the surface for some time?”

Thanks to her brother.

“Right. But...”

Zel looked down at her. “But?”

“Uh, when I went to Heaven, and tried to go in, the gate stopped me. And then, one of the angels said... ‘not again’.” She rubbed her arms. “And that’s when the Hell portal swallowed me up.” That was a lot of information, and for all she knew she was feeding it into someone who could turn out to be

a deadly enemy. But what else was she supposed to do? Her best bet at finding David started with her staying alive, and making herself seem important was probably her best shot at doing that.

And, maybe she was important? The whole aura thing was very real.

“Not again?” Zel held her chin in one hand, the other three arms folded across her chest. “The angels grew active when you died, and your delay before accepting your death is perhaps the reason they spoke such a phrase, if others like you did not wait. Perhaps there are more of your kind then, out there, somewhere. Unmarked.”

Shit.

“I don’t know. I’m just... just a regular girl. I mean, that’s what I thought, anyway. Boring typical person’s life, until I died.”

“Indeed. You seem like a normal person. You smell like a normal person. Fresh meat, waiting to be cracked open and your resonance enjoyed.” Zel squatted down beside her again, grinning at her with a sly, super-smart-and-knows-it smile. “But you’re not. I can feel the tingling sensation of a subtle aura, waiting to be grown. It’s not unlike a hatchling testing their sin for the first time.”

They were right next to the balcony edge. Maybe she could push Zel off?

“I hear that a lot. Hatchlings? Demons lay eggs? But, I also heard demons don’t lay eggs. I’m so confused.” Misdirection. Make her talk about other stuff.

But Zel shook her head, grin unrelenting. “I am not some devorjin for you to twist and manipulate. Diogo, smarter than other devorjins, is still a moron. I am not. Now, you will demonstrate to me your ability create a sin aura, and you will do so now.”

Double shit.

“I don’t know how to control it. It just... comes out of me.”

“Ah, I see.” At least the demon was willing to listen to reason. “A vola’s — succubus or incubus, fresh meat — sin aura is almost always sexual in nature, and that is the comparison Diogo made.” The giant demon, still squatting in front of Mia, reached out and traced a claw down Mia’s naked chest. “Are you a sexual creature, Mia?”

“I... uh...” Oh god oh god. The beautiful alien demon woman was looking at her from so damn close, Mia struggled to hold still. “I... am.”

“Oh? A vixen on the surface, were you?”

“Um, not really.” That answer wasn’t going to satisfy Zel. She needed to keep talking. Ugh, she wasn’t going to have a single secret about her private life left at this rate. “Just, had a really big sex drive.”

“A surface virgin?”

“... yes.” No need for a mirror. She blushed from head to toe, even more than when the big pretty deadly demon lady had touched her.

“How curious. And no demon has touched you?”

Adron had said Zel wouldn’t care if a human had touched her. The look in Zel’s black and red eyes confirmed. She liked the idea that Mia hadn’t been touched by a demon yet.

“I mean, no demon had... um, done anything to me yet, not really. Diogo wouldn’t let anyone. And Adron, he—”

“Adron.” Zel stood up as she rolled her eyes. “That sneaky little vratorin. What web has he spun this time?”

“I... don’t think he’s spun any webs. But, um... He’s been very nice to me.”

“No doubt. He is too smart for a vratorin, though he does have a habit of chasing his dick straight into trouble.”

Zel knew Adron well, apparently.

“He did save my life once. I owe him a lot.”

“Then he aided Diogo in carrying the prize to me. I should reward him.” Nodding, she gestured for Mia to follow, and they walked back into the spire. Outside was less scary. “Is there anything else I should know?”

“I don’t think so.” Mia hugged her arms as she sidestepped a remnant growing out of a hunk of flesh overhead. “But, why are you asking me so... openly? I could be lying, right?”

Zel smiled down at her. She either found Mia amusing, or straight-up liked the things she said. Maybe both? Hopefully both. Both meant a better chance of surviving longer.

“The truth will come out eventually. You’re not going anywhere for quite some time, I think. Unless you have some place to be?”

“I... don’t.”

The alien demoness goddess shrugged, with all four arms, and gestured to the another doorway. Another set of stairs to climb, ugh. Did the demons really take the stairs everywhere? It didn't seem like. The balcony layers inside the spire were close enough, demons jumped from one balcony edge to the next, going up and down. Powerful legs. Demons couldn't walk for hours, but they could probably kick ass running obstacle courses, if jumping floors was how they did most of their traveling in the spire.

“This game will take time to unfurl,” Zel said as she stepped into the next room, “and I see no reason to rush things, or to risk my assets; that's you, by the way.”

Mia clenched her teeth, and nodded.

Which of course only made Zel giggle. “Many human souls who come to Hell think of demons as villains, to be fought and defeated. I do not get that sense from you.”

“I... I guess not. Calling demons villains makes as much sense as calling surface predators villains because they eat herbivores.”

“Indeed.”

“Though, I mean... that's only true for the eating comparison. Torturing humans, or trying to kill angels, that seems pretty villainous.”

Zel nodded as she walked up to one of the walls in the new room. A small room, really just a short hallway with lots of hooks on the walls. And there were full skeletons on them, at least a few of them. No remnants, though there was plenty of flesh and stone where remnants could grow out of. But it seemed like the purpose of the room wasn't the corpses, but the hundreds of different things dangling from the spikes.

Jewelry. Black metal chains dangled from the hooks, some thin some thick, many of them with spikes, most of them with a skull or two hanging off them. Plenty of human skulls, but plenty of demon skulls, too. All the skulls were real.

Zel slipped her silk wraps off her body, and hooked them on the wall. Completely naked now, Mia couldn't help but stare at the damn tall woman's muscular, thin body, and her perky breasts standing out against her firm chest. And of course, holy shit those long legs. Somehow the length of her lean body fit the four arms really well.

Zel unhooked her belly chain, hooked it up on one of the spikes, and grabbed another chain, this one with bigger but fewer skulls. Brute skulls, judging from their size and lack of horns. She changed her necklace for one with a big skull, something even bigger than a brute skull, and four horns.

Massive. The other necklace had dangled skulls between her breasts, but this giant thing hung against her stomach.

She didn't stop there. A metal bowl dangled from a spike, and she plucked a couple white, thin things from it. Finger bones, sharpened on both ends? Whatever they were, she casually slipped them into her nipples, and she shivered — and moaned softly — as their tips pierced through the dark red skin. A single drop of blood rose to the surface of the skin, and Zel smiled down at her body as she casually flicked the small drops away. And with just as casual a motion, she grabbed a thin, dangling metal chain, and hooked its ends onto each nipple piercing.

She put her dangling silk scarves back on, made no effort to align them so they covered her bits, and squatted down in front of Mia again. And Mia had to somehow not stare at what she'd just done to her tits? She couldn't not stare.

“Interested in a woman's body?” Zel asked.

Mia yanked her eyes back up. “No! No... I mean, uh, a little? Who doesn't like boobs, right?”

“Ha. Of course.”

“But I definitely lean more toward men, on that spectrum.” How easily Zel put her into talking mode about herself. Being nervous did that. It wasn't a problem with Diogo, because he didn't want her to talk at all. Zel did.

“Men like your fellow man? Or men like Adron?”

Mia forced herself to not look down. Zel was reading her. Mentally, this woman was a lot closer to Adron than Diogo, and probably smarter than both of them. She had to be careful.

“Both, I guess.”

Zel licked her lips as she nodded, stood back up with all her new Hellish bling, and walked back out to the inner balcony. Mia followed.

“We are not villains.”

Oh, right, that topic.

“Torturing people and—”

“And simply doing what demons do. As you said, predators. Do not forget that the house cat slaughters wantonly, and rarely eats their kills.”

Mia sucked in a breath between her teeth as she looked down. That was a good point. Lots of animals did some pretty heinous shit, more than just typical predator prey dynamics. Ugh, David would have a nice counter to a statement like that.

“Regardless,” Zel said, “we are the children of Hell and Lucifer. As many demons say, we fight and fuck, and that is who we are. And the Great Tower ensures all souls sent to us are deplorable, vile things that have earned whatever trials we put them through. Until you.” She stopped at the inner edge of the balcony and leaned it over, smiling as she admired the sight. “Spend a few hundred years in Hell and you might find yourself enjoying torturing the occasional, despicable human.”

Mia fucking hoped not.

“And torturing and killing other demons?”

“They are demons, often slaves to their passions and desires. They can only be controlled with an iron fist, fear, and respect. Or would you rather demons rape and devour you?”

The more Zel talked, the more Mia liked and didn’t like her. She definitely had that manipulative air to her that put Mia on edge, but she also seemed smart and self aware, and perfectly happy to be what she was: a powerful demon. Mia liked that self honesty.

“I guess not.”

“And would you rather I hang you upside down, remove your innards, and keep you alive long enough to know what they taste like, instead of having this civil conversation?”

Mia froze. “I... think I’d prefer the civil conversation.”

Zel winked at her, and motioned for her to follow. “Indeed.”

They went up another few flights of stairs, Zel taking her sweet time. If she was as smart as Mia thought she was, the demon woman was planning things while they walked, probably dozens of things. What things to say to Mia, what Mia’s lack of a mark of the Beast meant, what her aura meant, what the increase in angel activity meant, how it all linked, and probably other things Mia didn’t know a thing about. And the quiet, slow walk and clack clack of her big hooves was also meant to make Mia stew in anxiety and fear. It worked.

“You are unmarked, and the lack of a mark seems warranted. Humans sent to Hell have a... quality to them you lack. Combined with your ability to create a sin aura as demons do, slightly different as it is, I think it is in my best interest to keep you alive, Mia. Alive and unharmed.”

Oh thank god. Okay, step one of her plan, successful, kinda?

“Thanks.”

“That is assuming you do the things I say. Disobey my orders and I will make an example of you. Understood?”

“Yes, very.”

“Good. Now, come.”

The longer Mia followed this woman, the more she really did feel like she'd joined the bad guys' team. That wasn't true, she knew that. This was Hell, and everyone down here was a bad guy, so no one was. And unless the angel activity was about saving her and David — unlikely from how they'd reacted to her at the Gate of Heaven — then she had no reason to not lean into this possible partnership. Yet.

The next room surprised her. The walls were literally covered in living flesh and bone, growing spikes made of metal and more bone and stuff, and cages dangled from the ceiling, filled with remnants squashed to the point of broken limbs. All that was quickly becoming the norm for her brain, and she half blocked it out. That hadn't surprised her.

The surprise was the orgy. She hadn't expected a giant room filled with naked humans, succubi, and incubi, all cuddled on huge piles of goort leather, and piles of the white silk stuff, too. Dozens of the ridiculously attractive demons squashed the men and women between their bodies, and wriggled and squirmed, rubbing firm or soft flesh against other flesh. Soft sex. Gentle sex. Slow, deep, massaging, tender sex, meant to take hours. In this room, it was everywhere.

It was a room of sex, of blowjobs and handjobs, of tongues and fingers going inside people, of sweat and cum. While plenty of the people and demons grouped up into piles of a dozen, plenty others were in smaller groups, threesomes and foursomes along the walls. Zel walked between the groups, and Mia did her best to follow, but her eyes ran away and locked onto the sights.

One woman, a small one like Mia, straddled a gorgeous, tall incubus. Behind her, two incubus fought for space around her, legs and hips intertwining, as they both sank their enormous lengths into her tiny butt, side by side. And the woman, a panting and mewling mess with a belly bulging from the sheer amount of cock pushing into her, did her best to give the two other incubi standing over her what they wanted, handjobs and blowjobs she was forced to balance and juggle.

The men got similar treatment. One guy in particular had a succubus underneath him that he lay on on his back, purely so her giant tits could be a pillow for his head, while two other women buried his face in breasts, and two more did crazy things to his dick with their mouths.

Mia groaned and forced her eyes onto the floor. Don't look don't look.

But of course she did look, because there was more than humans and sex demons in the room. A massive, giant, holy crap titanic beast of a demon man sat in the back center of the huge room of metal, flesh, and bone. He held a human woman's hands over her head in one of his hands, and he casually lifted her up and down so her limp, quivering body slid up and down on his massive cock. The bulge on her belly pushed out far, and he bobbed her just hard enough her large breasts gently bounced against the distension where it nearly hit her sternum.

How could she take something that deep? Or thick!? She looked a lot taller than Mia, but still.

The demon had hooves and no tail, and two wings. Giant wings. If he'd opened them they would have reached from wall to wall, each wing longer than he was tall. And his face was the classic male demon face, scary but oddly masculine, a flat almost non-existent nose with large nostrils, extreme eyebrow ridges and eye sockets, but normal demon eyes, and a hard jaw. A hard face, broad, with a huge scar along the chin. And, of course, very big fangs.

Adron had described to her what the tetrad demons looked like, but she'd had a hard time picturing anything bigger than Diogo. Zel was taller than Diogo, sure, but thinner. Whoever this colossal creature was, he was the same height as Zel, but probably weighed three times as much as her from muscle alone. Not as hunched or musclebound as Diogo, but still built like a truck.

He had skulls dangling from jewelry, too. A necklace. A leather belt. Chains attached to his wings. Chains attached to his horns. They jingled lightly as he bobbed the woman up and down on his cock like he was making a candle in hot wax. Up and down, slow but not too slow, each stroke taking the giant's cock all the way to his huge testicles that dripped with juices between his thick muscular legs. The woman, head dangling limp, had drenched the demon, and looked well on her way to doing it again.

"Ah, I can feel it grow," Zel said. "Diogo did not lie. That, is a sin aura, a sexual one. Different, and yet not." Grinning over her shoulder back at Mia, the tall demon walked past the orgy on their left and right, and toward the back where her fellow giant waited. "Saldavin. Do you feel that?"

The giant sat up straight, one hand still holding the betrayer on his dick, while the other pressed to the blankets. He tilted his head to the side slightly, enormous horns tilting with him as he looked at Mia. His skull had the same shape as Zel's big necklace skull hanging down to her stomach.

"She's unmarked." A deep, rumbling voice, like Diogo if he had more texture.

"She is. Diogo brought her to me."



Saldavin snarled, curling a lip up into a sneer as he looked at Mia. Slowly, he let go of the woman's hands, and they fell limp at her sides before she collapsed back against his giant chest and hard stomach. With an almost gentle touch, he wrapped his huge hand around her torso, and shifted her up and down again on the bottom few inches of his cock. Her tits rippled, the two of them sticking out between his fingers. Mia had seen this sort of movement thousands of times in porn. He was letting his orgasm build up, milking the pleasure, not going fast enough to cum on purpose.

"You think she has something to do with the angels?" he asked.

"I do."

He nodded, eyes still on Mia. All Mia could do was stand there, watch, and do her best to not let the whimpering woman in his hand hypnotize her. But, god, she was just so... full. Her pussy was spread taut, and drooling all over the giant beast's ridiculously thick cock. The only reason the demon even managed to get inside her was the fleshy texture of his girth, compressing just a sliver where the woman's slit squeezed on it.

How would it feel to get stretched open by hot flesh like that? By something so much more... alive, than her toys. And even Mia's biggest toys hadn't been nearly that thick.

Mia shook her head hard and forced her eyes away, but everyone everywhere was fucking. Where was she supposed to look?

Zel and Saldavin exchanged a few more words. She didn't hear them. At this point all she could hear was moans and groans, and the quiet splashes of wet flesh smacking wet flesh. And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't stop the tingling vibration inside her from spreading out. The more it spread, the louder the moans and groans became.

She opened her eyes again. Zel and Saldavin both stared at her, and Zel licked her lips.

"It continues to grow," she said. "That is a strong aura. Even the most talented vola struggles to build such a sin aura, Mia."

Mia squirmed in place. Did they have to stare at her like that? Like they wanted to fuck her? Like they wanted to pin her down and push huge things inside her?

"She's special," Saldavin said, licking his big teeth.

"Indeed. You and Gorlus will make sure nothing happens to her, understood?"

Saldavin nodded. Whether he respected Zel that much, thought of her as an ally he wanted to work with, or was just pretending to take orders, Mia couldn't tell. Some demons were smart, and some were not.

Fluidly, Zel walked past Saldavin deeper into the room, and motioned for Mia to follow as she stepped over the writhing bodies of men and women that surrounded him. Not following was not an option, and she didn't want to give Zel a reason to dislike her, not when torture was apparently one of her love languages. So, Mia followed, and stepped over, around, and sometimes on, people locked in sex.

Every single person she got closer to got more involved in whatever they were doing. One woman lay on her side, an incubus's head between her thighs, and a succubus's face pressed to her ass. Judging from the wriggling bulge on the betrayer's stomach, both of the demons had very big tongues, and had every inch inside her. And somehow, mid orgasm, she reached up, and looked up at Mia with half-closed eyes as her hand brushed along Mia's leg.

Would that be Mia in a few minutes? A few days? Never? Did she want that, or not want that? Masturbating last night, and having Hannah's fist inside her, had settled her horniness for... a whole few hours. Not even twenty-four hours later and Mia was full-on horny again, and now worse, thanks to this ridiculous scene.

Along the back of the large room, along a metal wall covered in more spikes, dangled dozens of different silk scarves, most of them white, some red, some black. Zel pulled one off, and handed it to Mia.

“Uh...”

“Would you prefer to walk through my spire naked, with that aura of yours demanding every demon nearby ravage you?”

Mia looked at the huge white scarf, and then back at the dozens of people and their orgy. More than a few of them were looking at her, and that included Saldavin, who masturbated with his toy a little faster. He was going to cum soon, and he was going to watch Mia while he did.

Mia would have fit in his hand much better than the taller, busty woman there. She would have fit right into the grooves of his fingers, and—

She shook her head hard, and forced her eyes back on the scarf wrap toga thing.

“Thank you.”

Zel laughed again, louder than usual, and pat Mia's head once.

"Be careful with such polite language. You'll tempt a voracious demon to devour you."

"Devour..."

"I'm sure you'd enjoy it, considering how this aura of yours grows." Zel reached up with all four of her arms, and stretched back a bit, showing off how flat and perfect her tiny waist and long slab of abs were. "I can feel it tingling through my skin, demanding I give in. And yet, it does not feel exactly like a sin aura. It is subtler, wider, and... unique. It is a wonder Diogo and Adron did not give in."

"I... I guess, yeah."

Zel squatted down in front of her again, a little closer than Mia wanted. Even horny out of her mind, she didn't like the idea of Zel's face only inches from hers, at biting height. But, Zel's skin was getting redder by the moment, so she wasn't likely going to bite or hurt Mia... unless that was how she enjoyed sex. Oh god, she didn't even want to think about how extreme BDSM could get in Hell. The movie Event Horizon had some ideas about that.

"But you wanted them to," Zel said. "For Diogo or Adron to take you."

Mia froze. "I... uh..."

"Did you want Adron to be your first? He is a handsome creature, and quite large for a vratorin. I'm sure he would have made your first time gentle, and dare I say, romantic." Nodding, Zel stood back up, set a hand on Mia's shoulder, and slowly guided her past the orgy again. "Until he gave into his urges, of course, and fucked you hard."

Gulp.

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

"Or Diogo? Perhaps you enjoy even larger beasts? Brutes of muscle." She stopped beside Saldavin, and nudged his huge hand off the betrayer trembling on his cock. "Your body is not a body of flesh like those on the surface, not anymore. It can handle quite a bit, betrayer or not." With an evil grin, she took the penetrated woman's hands into one of hers, and did what the giant did before, slowly lifting the woman up before letting gravity sink her back down. And of course, because she apparently wanted Mia to boil alive, Zel used another hand to press against the huge bulge sliding up and down the tall woman's stomach.

The colossal beast leaned back, spread his wings, and put his weight on his hands behind him. His huge testicles pulled up, inner muscles flexing, as the first gush of cum poured into the mewling,

panting, completely exhausted woman. And her belly distended with the fluid pouring into her, expanding for a moment before it came squirting out of her, gushing over the giant's testicles, all while Zel continued to gently bob the woman up and down on his cock.

Whoever the betrayer was, her head dangled forward, and her tongue hung out just slightly as a drop of drool fell. Her belly bulged a little more, and didn't return to normal, not completely, as the huge demon pumped her full of cum like... like a sex toy.

And through it all, the terrifying, gorgeous, scary, masculine beast, a ten-foot-tall goliath of muscle and wings and horns, watched Mia. With every wave of cum he filled his pet, a deep rumble flowed out of him, vibrating into the metal and stone of the floor, and up into Mia's feet. He wanted to fuck her.

The betrayer quivering on his cock managed to lift her head, and looked at Mia. She wanted to fuck Mia, too.

Mia looked around again, and held the scarf to her chest. Everyone stared at her, even more than before. They all wanted to fuck Mia.

With a satisfied chuckle, Zel let the betrayer go. Saldavin continued leaning back, eyes still locked on Mia, while the betrayer fell back against his abs again and lay there, arms hanging limp from her sweating body, legs spread around his massive thighs. Everything was on display, and Mia couldn't help but watch the dripping wet woman shiver in what was probably some of the best, most delicious orgasm aftershock tingles.

It looked amazing.

Zel put a hand on Mia's shoulder again, grinned down at her, and guided her out of the room.

A veil lifted from Mia's eyes, and coherent thoughts rushed her brain. Oh, right, she was in a big spire tower thing in Hell. There was more than sex sex sex in the universe. For a second there, sex had been all that existed.

"You demonstrated your sin aura quite well, Mia. I will find much use for you. Now, clothe yourself."

Nodding, Mia wrapped the huge silk thing around her, and did a half decent job of covering her breasts and bits. But, she did leave one breast visible, hard nipple included. If she covered herself completely, she'd be inviting a demon to pounce her. Fucked up as that was, she had to be smart. This wasn't a society that respected boundaries. This was a society that allowed, maybe even encouraged demons to simply take what they wanted and to indulge their desires.

No wonder Zel had to be so brutal when controlling them.

“Why are you... helping me?” She gestured to the clothes.

“I’m no fool. I gain no value out of torturing you, and despite what you may think, it’d probably only bring me little joy.” Again, the four-armed demon woman winked at her. “But a little is not nothing. Don’t give me a reason to look for such minor pleasures.”

“I... I’ll try not to.”

“Good. You will remain here in my spire as my prize, my slave, my toy, whatever I wish, until I know more. As I said, something is afoot in Hell, and I must learn what. I will not throw away a board piece when I do not yet know the rules of the game.”

Board piece?

“Do you... play board games, down here, in Hell?”

That got another laugh out of her, less feminine and controlled, more loud and boisterous. But it passed quickly, and she went back to the manipulative demon she was.

“No. But even one such as I does not ignore scrying pools. Now, come. I expect you to stay within my spire for some time, if not for eternity. I have one more demon to introduce you to today. And perhaps, another, who I am eager to see if you can... Well, that can wait until another day, I think.”

She’d been in the spire not even an hour and one of the rulers of Hell was planning to use her for her probably nefarious purposes. It was so cliché she wanted to puke.

“Can... Can I ask a question?”

Zel stepped up to the inner edge of the balcony and looked down into the pit, and the hundreds of balconies waiting below.

“Of course.”

Mia squinted. Zel was being awfully nice to her, but she had made it clear why. No reason to be mean to her, yet. Maybe she thought if Mia became important, it’d be better to have her as an ally, not a slave?

“I’m guessing you’re not just... sitting around, ruling Death’s Grip for fun. You seem to have a goal. From what others say, you’ve been up to something for a while now, maybe a fight with a neighboring province.” She had to thank Adron for the info later. “But you seem to have... I don’t

know, I get the impression you want to do more than just have fun ruling a chunk of Hell. You have bigger goals.”

Zel set her gaze on Mia, and squinted, same as her. Her black and red eyes were far more intense than Mia’s, and yet far more subtle. Like, looking into the eyes of a queen sitting at a table in a meeting of politics and war, while said queen quietly glares at a man she intends to see drawn and quartered in front of an audience. But thankfully Zel slowly put on a playful smile.

“You think me so ambitious? Demons wish to fight, and to fuck. Perhaps I am satisfied indulging those vices?”

“I don’t think so. You’re up to something.”

Zel squatted down, and looked into her eyes, this time from a whole six inches away.

“And how did you come to such a conclusion?”

“I... I just...” She shrugged. “You really got that air, you know? Diogo I can see enjoying ruling a spire, and doing nothing but enjoying that. Even Adron probably would, too. But you’re... you’re not like them.”

“No. I am not like them.” Zel ran a claw up along the glowing amber horn sticking straight up from the top of her forehead, and grinned. “Few spire rulers are. And perhaps I will tell you more some day. For now, you will remain ignorant.” Nodding, Zel stood up and walked along the balcony, gesturing for Mia to follow. “Though I am delighted to see you have a brain in that skull. Few human souls do.”

“Thanks.”

“And be careful with polite words. Few demons understand their meaning.”

“Sorry.”

Zel looked over her shoulder to her, eyebrow raised.

Mia sighed. “Sor—right, right.” Being polite, or rather not being polite was going to be an issue. “So, uh... do you really walk up and down the stairs to get to all these different floors? There must be hundreds. That’d take ages.” And right on cue, an imp fell down the hole, opened their wings, and landed on a balcony below. “My legs are going to fall off.”

“Learn to jump.”

“Uh...”

Zel giggled and shook her head, her long hair tendrils gently bouncing against her body, and dozens of finger bone piercings clacking together.

“Betrayers do not scale the spire often, and when they do, it is often with the aid of whoever turned them. But for you, becoming a betrayer is not an option we should take. Not yet. Who knows what would happen if you were tainted so. No, your guardian will help you with traversing the spire.”

“Guardian?”

Zel nodded, and took the stairs up. Forced to follow, Mia bit down a groan, and scaled yet another staircase. And another. Each floor revealed a new layer of demon activity, of black metal dripping with blood, and big cages dangling from chains, filled with remnants. One floor had a giant pile of skulls on one side, some human but most not, and from the big archway between the hundreds of skulls came the sound of battle cries and roars. Please don't go to the battle room. Please don't go to the battle room.

They went to the battle room.

Things only got worse inside the big room, because of course they did. There was a pit, circular, maybe twenty feet deep with walls made of bone and metal, and big enough for a basketball game. Zel and Mia were on top of the wall, the floor the pit was dug... or grown into. Bones were everywhere, absolutely everywhere, and a lot of them were fresh. Bleeding, gore-smearred rib cages, pelvises, arms and legs, the works.

Demons sat on the edge of the pit edge near Zel and Mia, all of them looking down into the pit below. Two demons inside were fighting, two tiger ladies. Or, they had been fighting. One tregeera was the clear winner, and she ripped and tore at the now dead fellow tregeera, until she got the breastplate off, and wasted no time getting through the hard dark skin to the bone underneath. Crack, crunch, she broke the sternum and ribcage, and removed her prize.

“What the...” Mia held her stomach as she looked away. That didn't help much, not with all the blood everywhere. It only got worse when the tiger in the pit threw the corpse of her kill up out of the pit, and a half dozen grems and imps pounced it. They tore the corpse apart, biting and shredding.

One of them looked Zel's way, and bowed — mid chew — before they froze, eyes locked on Mia and her forehead. At this rate she was going to need a hat.

“At least the vermin know to respect me,” Zel said, chuckling as she guided Mia past them and the corpse, toward the back side of the pit. “Imps and grems, forever impossible to control, but useful regardless. They clean the flesh from corpses, looking for traces of resonance, and they will defend the spire if need be.”

Imps and grems were scavengers, Mia knew that much. But seeing them tear into the huge woman's body and swallow down giant chunks of flesh, all for what probably amounted to a minor snack? Hell was a world where even just eating was an act of violence demons relished.

“Why... were they fighting?”

Zel shrugged. “I don't know.”

“You don't know?”

“Kasimiro might. It doesn't matter. In the past, these fools would slaughter each other over minor issues. But for many years now I have enforced a dueling policy, drastically reducing the amount of needless deaths. No demon is allowed to kill another demon except in a duel.” She sighed as she stepped on the pit edge, and gently nudged aside a skull with one of her big hooves. “But they still kill each other, of course.”

The tiger in the pit got up on her hind legs, and managed a small bow for Zel, before she jumped onto the edge. It was a huge jump, and she had to climb the last few feet up the pit's bony walls to get out, all while she chewed on her kill's heart. She got halfway toward the door before freezing, looked back at Mia, and stared. Ugh.

“Kasimiro? Who's that?” Mia asked, looking up at Zel and doing her best to ignore the demons staring at her.

Zel gestured to the end of the pit they were halfway to reaching, and the demon walking their way. He was up on the wall too, and wearing bits of black armor strapped to his body in various places. No weapon. Judging from the claws on his hands, he didn't need them.

She'd seen another one of these demons outside, before entering the spire. This one walked on all fours, and he — certainly looked like a he — was bigger than a tiger lady. He had a dragon shark face. That was the easiest way to think of it, a dragon shark face, without eyes. The nose or snout, if that's what it was, was all black, and he had two big horns that came out of his flat head that pointed forward like a bull's.

He looked like some sort of eyeless dragon shark walking on four legs, with massive shoulders, long arms, and a big long tail with spikes along its spine. And once he reached them, he stood up, and Mia gulped as she looked up and down the huge demon's body. He was as big as a brute, but with a much more tapered waist that gave him less of a juggernaut build, and more of a... delicious... perfect torso... and abs, and broad shoulders, and—

Mia looked down and gnashed her teeth together a few times. Stop it.



“Kasimiro,” Zel said. “This is my new pet, Mia. A gift from Diogo, and Adron.”

The shark demon clicked in his throat a few times, almost like dolphin clicks, but much deeper. Most demons had human-ish faces, even brutes, even Zel, but this one very much did not. The dragon-y snout and shark-like flat head looked strangely awesome, and scary.

“Correct,” Zel said. “Unmarked. And you may notice she has this persistent, quiet aura.”

The shark clicked a few more times in his throat before gesturing toward Mia.

“Kasimiro, you know she doesn’t speak Hellian.”

Rumbling, Kasimiro licked his many, big sharp teeth, and shook his head.

“I hate Estian.” Grumbling, the shark, or wingless dragon, walked toward Mia, and prowled around her. He leaned forward with every step just like a tiger lady would, or a dinosaur would, and he rumbled like a purring cat with a semi’s engine in their chest as he looked her up and down. If he’d stood up straighter, he would have been just as tall as a brute.

“One of the sarkarin,” Zel said. “The eyeless never do enjoy Estian.” Shrugging, Zel gestured to Mia again. “You will be guarding her with your life, Kasimiro.”

More rumbles from the shark dragon dinosaur.

“Fine.” With a heavy sigh, he stood beside Mia, and... did absolutely nothing.

Maybe she’d gotten too used to Adron and his playfulness, and had expected to run into more demons with that fun side to them. Zel did seem to have something of a playful side, probably mixed with large amounts of ruthlessness and brutality. But Mia’s new guardian seemed to have the same disposition as Diogo. Maybe even more of an asshole, considering the word choices.

Mia loved analyzing how people talked, to try and figure out what made them tick and what things she could say to make them happy or more sociable, but it was a dangerous game if she misread a demon. They weren’t humans, and if she made a bad call, they might take it out on her. Time to tread carefully.

“Uh, hi,” she said as she looked up at the big demon. “I’m Mia.”

He clicked once in his throat, and managed the smallest shrug. Okay, her earlier assessment was probably right, he was stoic like Diogo but also a lot more indifferent. He didn’t give a shit. Good to know.

“Kas frequently monitors the duels,” Zel said. “It is not uncommon for demons to recruit friends and try and kill each other, violating the rules. Duels must be a one-on-one battle.”

“Sounds kind of unfair for the little guys.”

Zel shrugged, and walked back toward the exit. Mia and her new shark dragon dinosaur bodyguard followed. The tall demon queen walked with a sway in her step, almost like she was walking on high heels, not hooves. Kas, on the other hand, walked like a monster, hunched over with his flat shark head out in front of him, and big thick arms hanging underneath his forward shoulders. Sometimes he lowered himself enough to walk on all fours, but he seemed to prefer walking on his slightly short hind legs, with his huge tail counter-balancing his weight. Just like a dinosaur.

“Duels on such an unfair basis are discouraged,” Zel said, “but not banned. The strong rule the weak. Such the is the eternal way of all things.”

Yeap. Mia should have seen that coming.

Zel approached the balcony, and jumped. It was such a fluid, seamless motion, Mia was left standing on the balcony edge, staring up at Zel as she hopped up to the balcony above. With the white silk and her long black hair tendrils flowing, it actually looked beautiful, and epic.

“Come,” she said, looking back over her shoulder down at Mia.

“Uh—aah!” The world turned into a blur as something grabbed her waist, and jumped. Gravity lost its hold on her, and she flew up into the air complete with whiplash, head snapping back and hitting something firm and warm. Kas’s shoulder. She was in his arms.

He landed next to Zel, somehow managing to land even more quietly than she did, before he set Mia down.

“Thanks,” she said, and she squirmed as she looked his body up and down. Ok, yes, the shark dragon dinosaur had an amazing body, and he’d just scooped her up like she weighed nothing and held her in the nook of his arm like—Sighing, she looked down and away, and clenched her eyes shut.

“I can feel the aura,” Kas said, voice a quiet grumble, before he clicked a couple more times deep in his throat.

“As can I,” Zel said. “This strange soul will be of great use to me, I think.”

Kas grunted, but after looking down at Mia with his eyeless face for a little while, he nodded, convinced. Good. If Mia was going to rely on this guy to keep her alive in this volatile place, it was probably a good thing he actually believed the reason his boss wanted him to protect her.

They went up a dozen more balconies. It took a whole thirty seconds. Mia forced down the urge to squeal with each jump as her stomach plummeted into her guts, before they landed gracefully on the next balcony, only to do it again and again. Kas didn't set her down between each jump either, instead keeping her snug into where his shoulder met his huge chest, and she fit into the inside of his long arm.

Okay, yeah, much as she'd always fantasized about a big handsome monster scooping her up and carrying her off exactly like this, this wasn't exactly what she'd had in mind. The groaning and dying remnants in their cages, the squawking, chirping, roaring, and moaning demons, the walls of flesh and bone, metal and stone, it spoiled things pretty badly. The tingly vibration in her guts settled to almost nothing again as she watched the horrorfests pass underneath her.

They were so high up. If they went out onto one of the more uncommon outdoor balconies, she'd probably be so close to the sky she'd have to deal with the burning heat of it. Not that the spire was air conditioned, but it didn't seem to get any hotter on the way up. So high up, if she jumped off the spire at this height, her body would have made a crater in the ground, maybe right down into the lava below. So high up, if a demon felt like murdering her without anyone knowing, that'd be exactly how they'd do it.

No wonder Zel got her a bodyguard.

The balconies weren't as wide higher up, and the hole between them smaller, as the tower tapered. But even in the skinnier top half, the tower was still plenty wide, and the rooms inside plenty large. Case in point, the room Zel took them into was huge.

The door wasn't like other doors. This one had a giant black skull with an open mouth for its entrance, same as her throne room. And it had white teeth stabbing up and down in front of it covering the maybe twelve-foot-tall doorway, with only a few inches of space between each tooth.

The strange amber horn on Zel's head glowed, and the teeth moved up and down, and disappeared into huge metal grooves above and below Mia, like the huge metal skull was absorbing the teeth.

"Come," Zel said, giggling softly as she gestured around.

It wasn't nearly as horrific and brutal as Mia figured it'd be. No remnants, no corpses, no freshly skewered dying demons or souls on wall spikes. It was a pleasant, huge room, with a giant pile of leather blankets on the side, a big open area of smooth metal in the center, and dangling chains above. The chains were, predictably, decorated with skulls of all sorts, but at this point in her four days in Hell, skulls looked less like dead bodies and more like a decorating choice.

The ground curved up along the right wall, and bones stuck out over it to create a stairway that led up to a sort of small platform that hung over the room, almost like a mini cliff. Zel walked up it, and

Mia followed, eyes on the big bone stairs her feet much preferred to the stone and metal. Kas stayed by the door.

There was a stone table, too big for Mia, and around it sat four huge chairs made of bones, with backs made of rib cages. Like in the throne room, the bones couldn't have been taken from a corpse. They were bones meant for this purpose. On the table, a small statue of a bolstara like Zel stood, made of metal, but a different color. Bronze? In its four hands, it held a burning bush, like the dozens Mia had seen before, but much smaller.

Just a little ways past the table was a window, about as big as the entrance to the room, with the same sort of teeth covering it. Zel approached, the amber horn on her head glowed, and the teeth pulled up and down, disappearing into the metal and stone that surrounded them.

Zel stood by the window, or more like giant hole in the wall, and motioned for Mia. She came, wincing against the hotter air, and sucked in a hard breath as she peeked down over the edge of the stone. The closest outdoor balcony was probably a hundred-foot drop. Blinking away some tears from the heat, she forced herself to look up, and to the mountaintops in the distance.

The window faced the center of Hell.

"What the..." Mia squinted as she stared out to the red sea. Even high up as they were, and the fact Hell was apparently completely flat, trying to see something hundreds of kilometers in the distance was borderline pointless. But even as a blurry mess, she could still see the sea, the center of the Hell donut, and the raging black clouds that hovered over it even closer to the water than the sky of fire over her right now. And not black like Earth clouds were. Black like obsidian wished it could be, and even so far away, she could see the lightning flashes.

"The Forgotten Place," Zel said. "Somewhere within that unending storm, in the center of all of Hell, lies the ninth spire, lost to us since the Spires War. Felezar had somehow managed to cross the sea, and indeed had come to control the spire. But he was not the first child of the Old Ones to rule a spire and die regardless. And not the last."

"How... How long ago was that?"

"No one knows. The Third Age and the Nine Spires war ended two thousand years ago, with the death of Belor. Felezar's death came long before then."

The time scale of Hell's history was massive. And it wasn't like anyone was writing this shit down, at least not in the detail someone would need to have an accurate understanding of when shit had happened. Demons had more of a hard time understanding their past than even humans did.

“Is that what you want? To get to this, uh, Forgotten Place?”

Zel chuckled and idly plucked at her nipple chain. “Perhaps. I have many goals, and with time, they may be revealed to you. You have a role to play in this upcoming war, and I must learn what it is before the knowledge can be used against me.”

“Upcoming war?”

Nodding, Zel gestured out to the right of the sea, toward some weird vertical line in the distance. It looked kinda purple, a bit red, a bit blue, and it swirled. So far, it was just a hazy blur, but there was only one thing it could be.

“I assume you know what that is?”

“The vortex,” Mia said. It was barely visible past the right edge of the middle sea and the black storm, and over the mountains past it. Something that far, and she could still see it? It had to be beyond massive. “I don’t know much about it.”

“Lucifer ripped open a hole to Heaven, in the First War. Forever it has twisted and turned in the sky over False Gate. It is the False Gate. And from there, angels come and go in greater numbers than they ever have before.”

“It’s so far away.”

“And yet, the angels cross the skies at great speeds, forever above us, forever out of reach.” Sighing, Zel gestured back to the pile of blankets. “This room is yours.”

“Mine?”

Nodding, Zel sat at the table, and motioned for Mia to do the same. Not exactly easy, considering the chair was made for people at least a couple feet taller than Mia, and she had to climb the damn thing.

A necklace was on the table. Mia hadn’t seen it before because of how high the table was, but there it was, a simple chain of black. Not a sleek piece of jewelry from the surface, no no, this was a proper chain, with thick inch-long links. One part of the chain held a crystal, something in the shape of a sharp tooth or claw, maybe two inches long.

Zel scooped up the necklace, and touched a long claw to the small crystal. Her extra amber horn glowed, the same sort of glow Mia had seen in the amber veins, and the same glow rolled down her claw and onto the crystal. And into the crystal. Mia blinked twice. It’d been so subtle, just a tiny motion, and now the crystal on the necklace glowed with a very subtle amber hue, like Zel’s horn.

“This will open and close your door,” Zel said, and she slid the necklace across the table to her. “But not the window.” And with a gentle flick of the wrist, she pointed some claws back at the window behind her, and the teeth closed, leaving only a couple inches between the huge white things. “It wouldn’t be safe to let you open and close it at your whim.”

Mia picked up the necklace.

“You’re giving me a room, and a key?”

“Indeed.”

Mia squinted at the demoness. “Uh, why?”

“Would you rather I bind you in chains and leave you in my throne room, in pain, for potentially the rest of eternity?” Grinning, the demon queen leaned forward and tapped a claw on the stone table. “If that is what you’d prefer, I do have a dungeon just waiting for more occupants.”

That was half the reason why Zel was so scary. With demons like Diogo, it was obvious they’d just kill anyone they thought would be a problem. Zel had the foresight and patience to think past her desires, and plan for the future.

“I uh, I think I’d prefer the bedroom.”

“Good. Though of course Kas will be staying with you, inside your bedroom. Can’t risk leaving you alone, can I?”

Mia looked behind her, down the small sloping stairway to the big demon standing — on all fours now — by the open door. He’d heard Zel, but didn’t even so much as look their way. One hundred percent just didn’t give a shit. She could respect that, but that didn’t necessarily mean she wanted that kind of person around her twenty-four seven.

“We can... trust him?” Mia whispered.

Zel giggled, nodding as she gestured to the necklace. “Put it on.”

Sighing, Mia slipped on the heavy chain. The little crystal dangled down to her sternum.

“How does it work?”

“Touch it when near the door. It will respond to your essence, with a little of your will to tell it to obey.”

A magic door-opening necklace. Mia would have been ecstatic in a different circumstance.

“I still don’t know why you’re being so nice to me. I mean, I’m glad you are, but it’s not like I have any knowledge or anything to give you.”

“No, you don’t. But you are more inclined to follow my requests from now on, aren’t you? And, my orders?” Zel leaned over the table, and her nipple chain clinked quietly over the hard surface, while her big necklace and huge demon skull hanging from it clanked much more loudly. “I already have at least one thing I would like to test, Mia. Something I would have you do. And I believe it will be easier to coax cooperation out of a pet, than a prisoner.”

“Something you want me to do? Will... it hurt?”

Again the demon queen laughed, sitting back and shaking her head.

“Of course not. Your pain brings me no value. Yet. For the moment, it costs me nothing to keep you as my pet, and I have no reason to abuse my pets. All demons do enjoy fighting, and fucking, with exuberance. But torturing souls is an acquired taste many demons do not have.”

“Not one you have?”

Zel shrugged. “Not as much as others.”

That wasn’t a no. Mia gulped.

“So all I have to do is just... be your pet?”

“Correct. Be my pet, stay in the spire, and do try to not get yourself killed. Kas is one of my more talented enforcers, but even he would lose to a group of brutes who decided they wanted to rape you and eat you once they were done with you. No doubt many demons want to know what the heart of an unmarked souls tastes like. Be careful.”

Mia sucked in a hard breath through her teeth, but kept her eyes locked with Zel’s, and even managed a solid nod, too.

“You think that’s a possibility?”

“Wildly unlikely. Any such demon would soon find themselves dying the slowest, most painful death I can devise. But I did not survive these centuries by taking unnecessary risks.” She tapped the table with a claw again. “Do not make me regret this leniency. As I said, I can simply tie you up, but forcing you to do what I wish may not prove as effective as your cooperation, and it is your cooperation that interests me.”

Nodding, Mia wrapped a hand around the amber crystal between her breasts.

“It’s a much better deal than I figured I’d get. I’ll do it.”

“Wonderful.” Zel stood up, and headed for the door. “Stay here and get settled until next rekindling. I will make sure the word is spread about who you are and your value to me. Perhaps you should get acquainted with your new guardian.”

“Acquainted...” Uh oh.

Giggling, Zel shook her head as she stopped by the open doorway, and tapped Kas on his long, flat head.

“No, Kas will not be touching you tonight. I want to experiment with the reach of your aura and your sexuality while you are unspoiled. And then again, once you are.”

Oh, great, Zel was going to make her do sexual things, too. For a second, that sent bile up Mia’s throat, and rage and heat up her spine. But it faded a moment later. Zel wouldn’t just throw a big brute or someone at Mia to rape her. That didn’t fit the whole ‘pet’ plan. She’d do something a lot more devious, and a lot more effective. That was still horrible, that Zel might force something on her, but... considering the orgy scene with Saldavin...

“I can feel that aura,” Zel said, chuckling again as she looked over her shoulder at Mia. “If you truly need satisfaction, masturbate. And perhaps give Kas here a blowjob or two. He could use some relief.”

The eyeless dragon snorted, clicked once in his throat, and grumbled.

“I... think I’ll be fine,” Mia said, standing up.

“Very well. You two should speak, nonetheless. You both know Adron and his feisty slave. Start there.”

And with that, the demon queen was gone, and the white teeth came out of the metal above and below her, effectively closing the door. It didn’t stop anyone from peeking in, but privacy didn’t seem to matter in Hell.

Sighing, Mia walked down the stairs, and stood in the center of her room. The pile of leather blankets, and even a couple silk ones, would make for a better sleep than even Caera’s room had provided. Plus, Caera’s room had been a tiny thing, and this room was bigger than a surface one-bedroom apartment. And much as she didn’t want to admit it, it was a cool looking room, with the dangling chains and skulls and stuff. Mia had gone through a bit of a witch phase in her teenage years, like all self-respecting girls did, and skulls and black metal were awesome.



Fresh blood and corpses were not. Thankfully her room didn't have any of that. It was clean.

She scooped the bronze statue of Zel off the table. Wow, heavy, but the tiny burning flame in the statue's grip didn't fall off. And if it was anything like the burning bushes out in the mountains, it'd burn forever.

"Kas," she said, setting the statue down before she walked down the wide bone stairs. "Can I call you Kas?"

He grumbled and clicked once. Whatever that meant.

"You know Adron?" she asked.

He rumbled deep in his chest, like a bear or something, before clicking once in his throat again. Was it in his throat? It bulged slightly when he did. Maybe it was something he did with his tongue in the back of his mouth?

"Is... that a yes?"

He sighed. "Yes."

"Uh, sorry, I don't speak Hellian." Shit, she said sorry again.

"Souls never do."

"There a reason you don't like speaking Estian?" It took some effort to not say English.

He tapped one of his big bull horns, grumbling. "The eyeless, like sarkarins and riivas, don't usually speak Estian because the vibration in the throat can bother our eyesight sometimes." He poked the flat top of his long head. It was almost bone hard, same as his horns, and made a soft tap tap sound.

"I... what? But you don't have eyes."

"We can see, with this." He tapped the black bone skin his horns came out of again.

"That—nevermind. I'll take your word for it." Some species on the surface had weird ways of seeing, and she was no biologist. And it was Hell, biology didn't make sense down here anyway.

"Why's it called Hellian?"

He groaned, rumbling deep in his chest. Yeah, he was annoyed, but he was also willing to answer her questions. She couldn't pass up that opportunity.

"Because hellbeasts speak it."

"What? Wait, what? The hellbeasts can talk?"

He shook his head. With how the two huge horns came out the sides of his head, and pointed almost straight forward, further than his snout did, head shaking was a dangerous gesture with him.

“Simple words. Kill. Eat. Fight. Fuck. Nothing surface animals don’t already make noises for.”

That was interesting, actually speaking the same language as animals.

“Can they—”

“No, hellbeasts can’t understand complicated Hellian words or sentences.” He turned and faced her, straight on. He sat almost like a cat might, but also almost like a bird might, and his huge arms were able to reach the floor. “You’re annoying.”

She stared at him, and waited for the follow up. But he didn’t follow up. He just stood there, and — supposedly — stared at her, after insulting her.

It was too good. She laughed, and laughed, and eventually fell to her knees on the pile of blankets.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just, that’s got to be the most normal reaction any demon has had to me, yet. It’s nice.”

He clicked a couple times in his throat, but said nothing she could understand. At least his posture relaxed a bit.

“You’re unusual,” he said eventually.

“I get that a lot. So, you really know Adron?”

He backed himself up a bit so his tail and back were in the corner of the room closest to the door.

“Yes.”

“How?”

Another rumble.

“We’ve worked together before.”

“Ah, interesting. Adron told me he—” She squinted at the door. She didn’t see anyone through the cracks between the giant teeth, but still, no reason to risk outing Adron’s secret agent job. “Yeah, he told me.”

“Adron is a moron, sometimes.”

Mia tilted her head to the side as she pulled her knees up to her chest, hugged them, and watched her shark dragon dinosaur bodyguard. Much as demons were all alien and weird, they were also kind of human-ish in a lot of their mannerisms and whatnot. And their inflections.

“He’s your friend.”

Kasimiro grunted again, but didn’t deny it, either. It was true, then. Good. Much as Adron was a mischievous troublemaker kinda guy, he also seemed like a nice guy, at least by Hell standards. If Kas was his friend, then hopefully that meant Kas was also a nice guy.

Of course, nice guy by Hell standards included Adron having his sex slave pin Mia down so he could get ready to sink his enormous dick into her tiny body.

Mia clenched her eyes tight and shook her head hard, earning a small head tilt from the horned shark.

“Do you... also know Hannah?” she asked.

He nodded.

“Um... how?”

His tail swished. Once.

“I fucked her with Adron, several times. He spoils her.”

Oh god. She shouldn’t have asked.

“At the... same time?”

He grunted, and nodded.

Mia groaned, and buried her face in her blankets. Christ, why did she fucking ask? The mental image of Hannah, lying back on Adron’s chest, his hand around her throat, choking her and holding her down, cock buried deep in her ass, while the shark demon with the body of a god sank his cock slowly into her dripping slit and—

She groaned louder. If Hell corrupted her anymore, she’d end up doing exactly what Zel suggested. Masturbate, and get to know her new bodyguard. She wasn’t that desperate. Yet.