~~Mia~~

Twilight came. Night wouldn’t be far behind, and the amber veins pulsed gently, announcing its imminent arrival. Mia, naked and alone save for her broken bodyguard, held a sharp bone in hand, for emergency self-defense stabbing.

A sharp bone wasn’t going to do shit.

Vinicius had found enough strength to sit up and move, but it’d been a struggle. She tried to help, but she might as well have been trying to push a truck with the emergency brake on. After some time, he’d managed to move away from the statues, the piles of bones, the torture devices, the corpses, and into the back of the giant cavern where there weren’t so many amber veins. Enough shadow that, as long as he didn’t move, he didn’t immediately stand out.

“I need… to eat something,” she said, wiping the sweat from her brow with the one of the few unbloodied parts of her arm.

Vinicius, arms now limp at his sides and wounds healed over enough he wasn’t leaking blood like holes poked in a water balloon, did not turn his head. Turning probably hurt. It might even tear the wound. He did rumble, though.

“It’s weird, right?” she said. “I shouldn’t be hungry yet, but I am. Humans take a while to get hungry, down here in Hell.”

“You’re not human.”

She stood up and glared at him. But, before she could go on a rant explaining how unfair that statement was, reality ripped the wind from her lungs. She wasn’t human. But still, that didn’t give the biggest asshole in the world the right to be a jerk about it.

Sighing, she looked back toward the corpses. Guts, blood, and bones. The hungrier she got, the less the absolutely disgusting, visceral, gory nature of Hell bothered her. The more the aching sensation in her stomach and limbs grew, the more she didn’t care about the skeletons in the torture machines, and the smell of fire and iron that permeated everything.

“Do you hear anything nearby?” she asked. “Anyone?” She held her breath, held perfectly still, and waited.

Vinicius did, too, and after thirty seconds of nothing, he clicked once. Must have been a no.

“I’m… going to get something to eat.”

“How?”

“Same way I fed you.”

Vinicius, head aimed down at her, said nothing, but the tiniest raise of his demon dragon eyebrows spoke volumes. Little her was going to cut up a wholly intact vrat body, save for the squashed head, so she could get another heart. Yes, she was, asshole. No need to say it, but she glared her words at him, anyway.

She marched back toward the mounds of bones near the more well lit section of the cave, grabbed the ridiculously heavy sword by the hilt, and dragged it toward her next victim.

The problem was the noise. Twilight hours meant hellbeasts on the prowl, and even though Death’s Grip was all messed up and hellbeasts were out hunting at unusual times, there was probably a good chance hellbeasts would still prioritize hunting at twilight. Unfortunately, she had no way of avoiding making noise.

So the tiny naked ginger girl swung the sword over her shoulder using every muscle in her body, earned a big splat of blood that hit her bare skin, and she made no sound. No grunts or groans, or screams of frustration, or sighs of disgust. She chopped and chopped, and quickly earned a new layer of blood and sweat.

At least this time, she didn’t have to literally yank the heart free. She had time to get surgical. Panting as quietly as she could, she got on her knees, and used her bone’s sharp edge to scrap away at the binding veins and arteries. It was a big heart, and filled both her palms, heavy and meaty and bloody and gross and all the things that made her very much not want to hold it. But the hunger wiped the feelings away.

As she walked back toward Vinicius, stepping around and over bones like a cat, she watched the huge hunk of meat in her palm, half expecting it to suddenly beat and jump for freedom. It did not. She reached Vin, stood in front of him, and held the huge meal with both hands as she watched the blood drip down her wrists.

“I won’t be able to eat all this… I think. I’ll give you half.”

Vin said nothing. His eyes weren’t even on the heart. They were on her.

She caught his strange, curious glance, gulped, and looked back down at the heart. The last time she’d done this, memories had knocked her on her ass, memories she did not want or need. But she was tired, her body ached, little scratches on her skin had only barely healed enough to stop bleeding, and the journey was only going to get harder. She couldn’t afford to be picky. Next time Vin killed a hellbeast, she’d eat it. And right now, she was going to eat this demon heart.

She sat beside Vinicius, deep in the shadows of the cave, and bit into the meat.

She hated how good it tasted. She hated how natural it felt to push her incisors into it until the meat split around the sharpness of her teeth. She hated how the flesh, unnaturally warm for a corpse several hours dead, flooded her mouth with deliciousness as she ground the meat with her molars. She hated it hated it hated it.

It felt so damn fucking good. The warmth spread into her limbs, filled her with tingles, and she sighed bliss as the ache in her joints faded away. She’d never done heroine, but from what her psyche books told her, the feeling was similar. Pain, discomfort, they disappeared as the warmth of a dead demon’s heart filled her.

The memories hit her a few seconds later. Hands, around a throat. A sword, through the guts. Sex. A lot of sex. The vrat had a taste for men, too, and what could have been an enjoyable, erotic memory, was tainted by the screams of pain. Rape.

Mia growled as she lowered her head and glared at the ground. At least she didn’t pass out, this time.

“Kas was right. Demons are horrible.”

Vinicius said nothing.

She took another bite. More memories of the same vein, and a lot of them. Whoever this vrat was, he’d had more than a few years on him.

Another memory, a blurry thing, showed slaughter from the vrat’s eyes, and a rather angry bolstara tetrad that looked suspiciously like Zel yelling at him. Was she upset the vrat had disobeyed her dueling law? It might explain why a vratorin this old and strong was out here, in a random tunnel, and not at the spire or something.

She stared at her empty palms. Empty. Her hands were empty. Oh god, she’d eaten the whole fucking thing.

“I… didn’t mean to do that,” she said.

Vin turned his head just enough to look down at her, and half rumbled, half chuckled as quietly as his gigantic chest and throat could get away with. And thank god he said nothing because right then she’d have probably punched him right in his wounded throat if he’d commented on how overpoweringly delicious a demon heart was, or that she had the appetite of a pig.

“I do not think hellbeasts will come,” he said after a few minutes.

“How do you know?”

He lifted a free hand and gestured out at the bones.

“No path.”

“There’s… no path. Right.” Hellbeasts would have carved a path through the bones, especially that wurm thing. It and other hellbeasts must have used a different path, one of the forks they’d passed. “Only realize that now?”

“I’ve been distracted.”

She smiled up at him, got up, and stood in front of him. No hellbeasts didn’t mean they could afford to be loud and give away their position, but if she whispered, it should have been fine. Besides, after the noise she’d just made cutting up a vrat like she was chopping wood, anyone nearby was already on the way.

“Death’s Grip seems to have a lot of these… groups, I guess, random demons going around hunting and raiding and shit.”

Vinicius clicked once, deep in his throat where the sound was low.

“How big do the groups get?” she asked. “I know there’s three big ones, with bailiffs. Diogo had one.” She shivered. “Tacitus has one, and he’s on this side of the canyon, right?”

He clicked once for yes.

“Think we’ll run into him?”

Another click, but with a different pitch. No. Hey, look at her, learning the language.

“Good. If he’s running a chunk of Hell, I can’t imagine he’s too nice.” Rolling her eyes, she gestured to Vin. “Not that you’re nice, either, but at least I can stop you from eating me.”

Vin’s eyes slowly looked her up and down, his tongue slipped out from between his crocodile teeth, and he licked them. He took another look, and a quiet, almost purring rumble flowed through his giant chest. It wasn’t the first time she’d heard that rumble. Adron made it a few times, and Kas made it often, when he was getting ready to…

She looked down at herself. Covered in blood and sweat, her long red hair stuck to her shoulders, and crimson dripped from her fingers. She looked… kind of awesome, like she’d walked out of a Robert E. Howard story.

Groaning, she turned slightly and covered her small breasts with an arm.

“That’s not what I meant when I said eating me.”

He rumbled again, another long purr that bordered on earthquake, a rumble only someone — something — as big as Vinicius could make. If transport trucks could purr.

Yesterday, she’d have brushed him off, maybe thrown an insult or two his way. Right now, she had a fresh demon heart pulsing through her, and while the flood of new energy settled her aches and pains, it also brought something else with it. And now, the fact they’d just killed demons and barely survived the battle didn’t seem so horrible anymore. It seemed… exhilarating.

The fingers inside her chest plucked the strings, and the silent music grew faster and louder as memories of Vinicius’s cocks — plural! — pouring cum onto her body resurfaced.

“No no, no. We’re not doing that.”

He rumbled and clicked twice.

“It’s not my fault!” It was difficult to whisper and yell at the same time, but she managed. “It happens every time I eat. Just… like… I don’t know, taking an aphrodisiac and energy drink at the same time. Not my fault.”

He said nothing.

“Stop looking at me like that!” She turned around and faced away from him, but of course all that did was put her bare ass on display. Her great, amazing ass. Her firm ass would definitely look even more amazing with one of Vin’s giant cocks—

Stop thinking like that. Stop letting the weird thing in your chest plucking strings immediately jump to sex. How much of that was because she was inhuman, and probably had succubus blood or something, or because maybe she was just a naturally super horny girl? She had no idea, but whatever the reason, it was something she had to deal with. Stop thinking about sex. Stop thinking about her small body squashed between two huge demons, filling her, stretching her, making her wriggle and squirm. Stop thinking—

She threw up her hands, grabbed her hair, and pulled on it as she stomped her feet a few times. Vin wasn’t using a sin aura, not when he needed every bit of resonance he had to fuel his recovery. Nope, this was all her, and that demon heart energizing her.

Back in university, as a gift to herself for doing really well on her exams, she’d bought herself some dildos. Some very big, very inhuman dildos. And because her horniness level had gone through the roof, to the point she’d seriously been considering seeing a doctor about nymphomania, she’d tried to fit both dildos into her at the same time. She’d only been partially successful. But down here in Hell, Kas and Adron had fit even larger things into her, all to the way to the base. They’d filled her up in ways that only worked down here in Hell, and she’d absolutely loved every moment of it.

She wanted that. She wanted more of that.

But her memories were cruel. She thought about Vinicius and his two cocks. She thought about Kas and Adron squashing her between their bodies. And then, she thought about Hannah.

It still hurt. Not as much as it used to, but it still did, and it ripped the desire out of her. Good. If she had to think of Hannah to keep her stupid sex drive under control, maybe she should. That was fucked up, very fucked up, but this wasn’t normal. She’d had a ridiculously high sex drive when she’d been alive, but it was even higher now, and it was going to be a problem.

What did David do? David apparently had a very attractive gargoyle at his side, and judging by what Mia saw of her, she was awesome. And if David had the same issue Mia had, he was probably sleeping with her frequently.

All Mia had was Vinicius, a giant asshole.

A giant asshole who’d saved her life.

Sighing, she relaxed and let her arms hang at her sides. Vinicius rumbled, clicked once, and tilted his head slightly.

Chuckling weakly, she turned around, and gestured to Vinicius. The fingers in her chest didn’t pluck the sex strings anymore, and for a while, plucked the cold, heavy strings she felt every time she thought of Hannah. But she calmed those, too, and muted the strings as best she could. She succeeded.

“You can look all you want, but injured like that, you couldn’t get hard even if you wanted to. And if I don’t use my aura on you like last time, would you even want to, if you were healed?”

His dragon gaze stayed on her as she walked up to him and stood between his giant legs.

“I would.”

She squinted at him, even as she blushed. According to Adron, demons were attracted to humans pretty much by default, and a lot of demons took that too far. Way too far. Hell was a horrible place for a human. It was one of the many things Kas absolutely hated about his own kind.

“I’d be flattered, if I didn’t know what demons were like. How many of the humans you fucked weren’t willing? How many did you eat after?” Her horrible imagination changed ‘after’ to ‘during’ and she winced. But she didn’t close her eyes. She kept her eyes on Vin, and waited.

“Why do you care?”

This again. So much for sexiness a moment before. Maybe she didn’t need her memory of Hannah to squash her sex drive, not when all she had to do was think of how horrible a monster Vinicius was. A horrible monster… who’d saved her life, when he didn’t have to.

“I don’t understand you,” she said. “I really don’t get you at all. You could have let me die, but you didn’t. So I start to think maybe you aren’t so bad. Then you say something to prove otherwise! Unless Adron and Kas were lying to me, you have a history as one of the most violent demons in Hell.”

“You underestimate other demons and their desires.” Sighing, he released a slow breath, and warm — thankfully mostly odorless — air flowed over her. “I have power. They do not.”

“So the only reason most demons don’t go around on mass killing sprees is because they aren’t strong enough?”

“Yes.”

She folded her arms across her chest. “I don’t believe you. Adron wouldn’t do that. Kas wouldn’t.” Wouldn’t. Not wouldn’t have.

“Weak.”

“Weak what? Weak mind? Bullshit. You didn’t see Kas and the sort of demon he was. And you saw Adron fight the rider, even stab him. After you burned him!” There it was. Anger. Anger was good. She was okay with being angry right now. Better than being horny, or sad. “Why did you save me? Be honest.”

Vinicius rumbled and watched her with a strange, almost passive expression. Curiosity? Intrigue?

She gave the flat of his big raptor foot a kick. Without shoes, the best she could manage was a light kick with the side of her foot, barely hard enough to move a soccer ball.

“I want you to tell me about yourself.”

Nothing.

“I want you to tell me about the things you did before Zel locked you up.”

Still nothing. She kicked his foot again, not hard enough to mean anything, but still, it seemed like the right thing to do.

“I rescued you from Zel’s dungeon. You owe me.”

“You did that for yourself.”

Oh, that’s how it was gonna be. She glared up at him, walked closer until her shins were almost pressed to his — thankfully flat — crotch, and with his giant legs on either side of her, she reached out and poked him in the sternum.

“I wanted to save myself, sure, but the first time I saw Zel hurt you, I felt horrible for you. Adron and Kas told me about you, and I still felt horrible for you. When I realized maybe I could save you, that was the tipping point. I wasn’t just saving myself, I was saving someone who’d been suffering torture for so long I couldn’t even wrap my mind around it.” She turned, face his right leg, casually grabbed the big black spike coming off his knee, and tugged on it meaninglessly. Almost as hard as steel. “See, here’s what I think. I think you’re a horrible monster that’s raped and killed tens of thousands of humans and demons. Hundreds of thousands, with how old you probably are. But I’m the first human you’ve ever dealt with that wasn’t a horrible person, aren’t I?”

He growled, but said nothing. His stoicism meant she got to talk as much as she wanted, and as long as she was quiet about it, she had no reason not to. Besides, the demon heart had her brimming with energy, and she needed to let some out.

“You don’t really know how to deal with me, do you? I’m the first person you’ve ever dealt with that genuinely doesn’t want to hurt people, or want to use others to get ahead, or any of that.”

After a rather abrupt growl, he turned his head slightly and looked away. Bingo.

“You’re stumped.” She leaned in toward him, pressed her hands against his giant abs for balance, and checked the gut wound Zel had given him. Healed. “You probably think I’m going on this journey to save my life, right? Or my second life or whatever.”

“You are.”

Another piece of the puzzle, found. Figuring out the sort of person Vin was wasn’t easy, but she was getting there, and her poor, helpless victim didn’t even realize it.

“You think?” She stepped up onto his leg on the same side as his wounded neck and lifted his fingers. Surprisingly, he let her. She had him on the ropes, stunned and confused. “Then it’ll surprise you to know I’m going on this journey because the idea of everyone dying hurts me. That’s how empathy works. Yes, I’m terrified of dying… again. I’m horrified of the idea of becoming a remnant, and I’m terrified of the idea of who I am, my thoughts, my memories, all that disappearing. But I’m going anyway, because yes, I want to save myself, but I also want to save everyone else. Knowing that everyone could die if I don’t do something? It hurts me, right down in my fucking soul.”

Sighing, she lifted the wrap that covered his neck enough to check the wound. Not bleeding anymore, a paper-thin layer of new, bright-red skin growing over the gashes. He was healing rapidly. Nodding, and even giving the giant asshole a smile, she climbed back down, stood between his bigger-than-Mia-sized legs again, and met his eye; with his head turned, she could only see the one.

“Don’t get me wrong, Vinicius. I’m no hero. I’d love to go find Kas and Adron, mourn Hannah, and spend the rest of my time enjoying great sex. Fuck, if I could actually live again, that’d be even better. Just spending my days reading my psych books and trying to fit oversized dildos inside me while I read shitty monster porn stories? That’s what I want to be doing, not this fucking trip across Hell, risking my neck. But I’m going anyway, because I don’t want to die again, and because I don’t want everyone else to die, either.”

No response, so she pointed up at him, and poked him in his sternum.

“You still don’t believe me, do you?”

“No.”

Rolling her eyes, she poked him as hard as she could, but a solid wooden wall would have yielded more.

“Well, I’m dragging your ass across Hell, whether you want me to or not, so you’re gonna get to see a whole awful lot of this tiny little ginger girl crying her heart out every damn time something bad happens.” Nodding, she sat down on his leg, both her feet on the ground between his thighs, and she folded her arms across her small breasts. “Because I am an overly empathetic, sensitive mess of a girl who can’t help but cry when I even think of a sad movie. I can already guess there’s probably going to be really stupid situations where I try and help someone I shouldn’t, my naiveness nearly gets me killed, and you’ll have to save me.”

He sighed, but at least he didn’t growl. He even looked at her again, turning his head so he could use both eyes.

“I should let you die.”

“Maybe. But then you won’t get to see what happens.”

“What… happens?”

She tilted her head. “You’re not curious about what’s going on? A female version of the rider shows up and tells me I have to get to the Forgotten Place or we all die? You have to be at least a little curious.”

That got something out of him. He rumbled, his eyes drifted up in thought, and eventually he nodded.

“Exactly,” she said. “You want to rule Death’s Grip, right? Can’t do that if it’s gone. And what ruler doesn’t want to know more about what’s going on around their land?” She nodded again and wiped away the mix of thoughts going through her mind. Don’t hate him. Don’t fear him. Don’t be attracted to him. Work with him. “Once we’re sure Adron and Kas are alive, we move onto the Black Valley.”

“And how do you plan to learn that?”

“I’m… not really sure. How do demons usually figure things out? Like, if Alessio wanted to march her demons from the Black Valley to Death’s Grip and take it over, how would she know when it was a good time?”

“She wouldn’t.”

Mia gulped. “She’d just… send thousands of demons to fight, without knowing?”

“Tens of thousands.”

“Fucking yikes.”

“And there are some unreliable ways. Scouts and spies, or the imps and grems, who take months to report back.”

“Imps and grems?”

He nodded. “The infernal pests chatter with each other incessantly, and travel around Hell frequently.”

“Oh, so… gossip. We can catch an imp or grem, and figure out what they’re saying on the grapevine?”

His turn to tilt his head.

She laughed and shrugged. “Never mind.” Smiling, she patted his abs. Woop, nope, don’t do that. Abs are sexy and Vinicius was twelve feet tall. His abs were almost as big as her whole body. “And hey, it’s not like I don’t understand this is Hell, the people here are awful, and demons do demon things.”

Somehow, miraculously, that made the big asshole chuckle, quietly anyway.

“No demon cares what a human thinks of us.”

She frowned up at him. That wasn’t true. Adron proved that.

“My point is, if something comes up that’s particularly… something you know I won’t enjoy but you want to do, I’m not going to stop you. Probably.”

He grunted.

“I mean it! I mean, it’s the least I can do since I’m forcing you to help me, right? Demons do demon things. As long as it’s not to someone who doesn’t deserve it, and I don’t imagine we’ll run into those people often, you can… be… demony.”

He eyed her, a slow, gentle rumble flowing through him, and the vibration reached down through his leg right up her butt. What she was saying might be a problem in the future, but she did mean it. Much as it would hurt seeing Vin murder and… do other things, to demons and humans, she had to accept that she was in Hell and her whole morality code didn’t really apply down here. Different world. Different rules.

“I’ll hold you to that,” he said, and licked some of his crocodile teeth.

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~~Day 34~~

Finally! Sunlight! Or, firelight. Whatever. The sky of swirling amber and deadly flame looked beautiful compared to rock and stone walls.

Vinicius walked ahead of her, but walk turned to climb when the only way out of the tunnel turned into a literal wall. At least the way up was a tunnel, too, so Vinicius had rocks in front and behind him to grab and pull on. A tough climb for any demon. An impossible climb for a short human without claws, so she rode his back and stood on the many giant spikes there.

Lifting his own bodyweight must have been an insane challenge, and sure enough, Vin’s wounds reopened and leaked blood down his body. Mia wore her torn and half ruined sash toga thing again, permanently red now, and she was tempted to take it off and wrap it around Vin’s neck again as it started to bleed again. She couldn’t do it while he climbed, though, and now that he was mostly, kinda, sorta healed, he wouldn’t accept her help, anyway.

Four arms made the climbing easier. He might not have been able to do it without them. His muscles bulged, a lot, and Mia had to force down a squeak as she watched them practically pulse with his heartbeat with each foot he climbed. His back, his arms, his legs, they were all just so ridiculously huge, and all of them, even his tail, worked to keep his weight on the grooves in the rock wall.

He got them out of the hole, and Mia climbed down his body.

“Finally!” she yelled in her whisper voice, and jumped a few times, hands in the air. “We survived!”

Vinicius grumbled, put a hand on each of his wounds again, and walked toward the edge.

Edge? Oh shit, they’d come out on a mountain. She shouldn’t have been surprised, since all sense of verticality had been lost after wandering around tunnels for a week. After a healthy dose of vertigo had her tilting and swaying for a couple seconds, she followed Vinicius to the edge of the mountain.

The spire was in sight, barely. Judging from the shape of the mountains, Vin and Mia had moved counter-clockwise around Hell — because otherwise they’d have hit the ravine again — and toward its outer edge a bit. Unfortunately, the winding tunnels meant for all their walking, they hadn’t covered much ground.

Unfortunate if her only goal was to get to the Forgotten Place. She had another goal.

“Okay,” she said, “so we find an imp or grem, and ask them if Adron or Kas are…” Vin’s silence was like a steel knife through the guts.

He stared out to the valley below where the spire and the ravine were, dragon snout aimed up slightly at the spire’s tip. It wasn’t tilting as much anymore, but they were too far to see if it’d repaired any of the damage caused by the ravine. That wasn’t what Vin stared at. He stared at the giant amber beam shooting out of the spire straight up into the fire sky.

“What is that?” she asked.

Vin rumbled, and his two free hands flexed, as if crushing another gargoyle’s rib cage in his giant grip.

“Someone has begun the trial.”

“Trial?”

“To become the new spire ruler.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that required an actual trial. A—oh you mean, like, a struggle or something.” The image of a bunch of demons sitting in jury seats, while a demon judge wielded a wooden hammer, made her smile. She wiped it away quickly. “How does that work?”

“Someone must engage the book of Lucifer in the depths of the spire, and be challenged.”

“Right, that book. That was a scary book.”

Vin looked down at her, eyes donning a new intensity, and waited.

“Um, it talked about Lucifer. Or rather, Lucifer talked about his goals. You know, fighting, taking down Heaven, taking back what’s his—er, theirs. It borderline read like a military leader’s speech before starting a ‘righteous’ war.” She air-quoted righteous. “It talked about Belial. Rise Belial this, rise Belial that, attacking Heaven, and it gave me the names of the nine spires, the nine heavenly islands, and… and… stuff.” No need to talk about the runes floating around in her skull. “I didn’t read anything about a trial.”

“Not all that the book knows is shown to the reader.”

“Not…” Okay, magic book that obeyed its own rules? Whatever. If it was written by Satan, she could accept that. She gestured to the spire. “Does this affect us at all?”

“Only if the new spire ruler is concerned with us. They could summon the horde, and tear this land apart looking for us.”

“Fuuuuck.”

He shook his head. “Death’s Grip is in chaos. The new spire ruler will have two concerns: defense, and creating a bridge for the ravine.”

“A bridge?”

“Yes, perhaps one crafted using the spire.”

“Oh wow. A spire ruler can do that?”

He half grumbled, half growled, and the vibration of his heavy voice flowed through the ground.

“I… don’t know.”

She had to be careful. Each time she indirectly mentioned that Vin wasn’t the spire ruler, the muscles in his body flexed, and his tail twitched slightly. If it wasn’t for the brute heart he’d eaten before the body dissolved before they got moving again, he wouldn’t have had the strength to climb the hole out of the tunnel, and he was bleeding from his wounds again. He was drained, probably still hungry, and injured. And she was still terrified he might freak out and go on a rampage if she said the wrong thing. He might hurt her, but more likely, he might hurt himself, and she needed him.

And she didn’t like seeing him hurt.

“Let’s find somewhere you can rest up, somewhere safer than the tunnels.” She gestured at the mountain beside them. It looked like they were halfway up it, and only a gap between other mountains let them see the spire valley. Mountains everywhere, jagged and sharp and mean. A couple of them had bits of lava leaking down their sides, too, small streams that disappeared into tunnels. If their tunnel had met one of the newly formed lava rivers, that would have not ended well.

“No,” Vin said. “We should find a grem or imp, learn what you wish to learn, and move on.”

“We can do that when you aren’t leaving a blood trail everywhere you go, Vin.”

He snapped his gaze at her, hard enough a new trickle of blood ran down his chest from his neck. Ugh, this guy. But he did at least glance down at the surrounding blood. A blood trail didn’t last long in Hell, but long enough to be a problem.

“Fine.”

She smiled up at him and stepped in half behind and beside him as the huge demon began the search for somewhere to rest. They should have just stayed in the tunnel for another day or two, but that was risky. Instead, they’d decided to gamble on getting out of the tunnels. More like, Vin had been too stubborn to just sit down and heal in an exposed place. She didn’t blame him.

They found a cave, the perfect kind, a tunnel that twisted and turned enough you couldn’t see the exit from the back of it. Problem: it was so small Vin had to duck under the ceiling to keep his horns clear.

He sat down, and much as he tried to hide it, he was thankful to get off his feet. But that led to the second problem: no room. So, with a heavy sigh, Mia sat on his leg again, her feet on the ground and between his thighs.

“Back in a tunnel,” she said, groaning as she gestured around. There were amber veins, though, and no bloodgrip, thank god.

“Cave. And it was your idea.”

“I didn’t think you’d start bleeding all over the place climbing up that hole. You said you could do it.”

“I did do it.”

She gestured at the red line running down from his thick neck down his colossal chest.

“Am I going to have to take care of your stubborn ass all the way across Hell?”

He rumbled, set his gaze on the curve of the tunnel that led back outside, said nothing, and did not move. He held his wounds, two arms free and limp at his sides, tail beside him, and turned into a statue so completely still, she did a double take of his chest to make sure he was still breathing.

“I will, you know,” she said.

Without moving a muscle, he aimed a dragon eye toward her, and waited.

“I mean, if you get hurt, I’ll help. I’m not going to be dead weight you have to literally drag. If you get hurt, I’ll do what I can to help. And I’ll do what I can to get food.”

“You can’t—”

She stood up on his thigh, balanced without trouble, and flexed. Yeah, sure, she wasn’t exactly swimming in muscle, but she was a fit, strong little thing, and she’d proved that.

“If you teach me how to hunt and fight, I bet I can help? Maybe find me a weapon… that doesn’t weight a hundred pounds.” And to show how awesome she was, she kicked the air while simultaneously still balancing on his leg.

Miraculously, that got another chuckle out of the demon. She was getting past his mental defenses! Or, she was just that pathetic, he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Only the Red Pits and the Navameere Fields train their demons,” he said.

“Really? I kinda figured more spire rulers would train their demons. For a stronger province, you know?”

“Death’s Grip and its tribes are skilled. They are forged in combat against each other, and against the Cainites.”

“That really as good as proper training, though?” She sat down on his leg again, her feet barely reaching the ground, and she bounced her heels on the stone. “Though, I mean, I guess training demons would be kinda weird. Most of you use your hands and claws, and you kinda just… slash a bunch.”

Vinicius clicked a yes.

“So,” Mia said, “the Navameere Fields and the Red Pit do training? Like, how to fight and kill and stuff?”

“Yes.”

“And my brother, if he wants to get to the Forgotten Place, he has to get to False Gate, like us. Which means he has to go through those provinces?”

Another click for yes.

She sighed. “I don’t suppose the other provinces are any nicer than Death’s Grip?”

And another chuckle. Wow, she was on a roll, for better or worse.

“They’re worse.”

Fuck.

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~~Day 35~~

~~David~~

Another bout of sex, officially survived. They’d found another cave, taken a break, and the girls had come back from a successful hunt. Much as David wanted to push hard like when trying to catch up to Mia before, he knew from experience demons just didn’t do long distance very well. In retrospect, most animals on the surface didn’t, either. It was a decidedly human-specific quirk for the most part, the ability to walk vast distances.

So they didn’t push too hard, which gave them time to hunt, and gave them time to fuck. They came back with food, they all ate, David managed to not pass out from the weird flood of memories, and they all sat and relaxed. And then fucked. Much as the memories weren’t fun, the way a heart sent energy and desire through his limbs was too strong to ignore. He was pretty much a sex addict at this point, and his body seemed a-okay with that.

And with everyone satisfied, he lay on his back, panting and sweating, while Dao and Jes snuggled into his sides opposite of each other. With his arms out, they both found the grooves of his shoulder, and pressed into his chest. They were both so much taller than him, their feet went way past his.

“This is absurd,” Acelina said. She sat not too far off, closer than she needed to, considering the cave was decently big. “Look at this. You coddle and pamper the boy.”

Dao chirped a couple times and pressed into him harder.

“Yeah, we do,” Jes said. She reached over him past Dao, grabbed his arm, and pulled it around Dao so he hugged the satyr to his side. Satisfied, the gargoyle rested her head on his shoulder again. “Hug us, you asshole.”

He gulped, chuckled, did as ordered, and hugged both women to his chest and sides. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to hug them, but doing that with Jes was a gamble. Apparently not anymore.

He smiled down at the gargoyle as her horns hit against the side of his head while she got comfortable, adjusting her long, smooth, black dreadlocks. Dao had more trouble, considering two of her horns were big ram horns that curled around her head. Eventually she settled on placing her forehead against his shoulder and chest, just below the collarbone, with the front, blunt side of each of her curling horns gently pressing on him.

No eyes, no hair. The two big black ram horns came out of the sides of her forehead, and the two black horns in the middle that curled up and back came more from the center of her forehead. A black, bone-like thick plate covered where her eyes would have been, connected to her forehead, and created the foundation her horns used as a firm connection to her skull. Perfect for head-butting. She rubbed it into his skin, and he smiled as he watched her face-rub like a cat would. The weird face plate felt smooth.

Dao tilted her head up, aimed her eyeless gaze at him, smiled, slid an arm across his chest until her hand slipped between his other side and Jes’s stomach, and she hugged him tight.

“Disgusting,” Acelina said, gesturing to them with a wing.

Laughing, Caera prowled over toward Acelina and gestured to her body.

“You came how many times, masturbating while watching?”

Acelina scoffed. “Sex is an exercise in pleasure and trust, and I trust none of you. And it is not a… a… precursor, to this disgusting display of pampering.”

David raised a brow, but when he tried to lift his head, Jes pushed it back down with a finger.

“Ignore her,” Jes said. “Bitch doesn’t know how satisfying cuddling can be.”

Daoka clicked and nodded.

“I’d be cuddling him, too,” Caera said, “if I didn’t think he’d get crushed under three women.”

David tried to lift his head again, and again, Jes pushed it down. Okay, he wasn’t going anywhere, or allowed to see. Nothing to do but stay lying down while two beautiful demon women continued to squish their big breasts into him. Oh the humanity.

“Other demons have shared tales with me,” Acelina said, “of the trials and struggles of Death’s Grip. I sometimes watched the mountains from the balconies of the spire as Zelandariel explained to me how the roaming tribes of Death’s Grip, while they often bowed to her bailiffs, frequently fought amongst themselves. She told me life was harsh between the jagged rocks of her kingdom, where tens of thousands of demons forged themselves into killing machines against each other as much as the cruel stone. Only through the strength of a lifetime of unending struggle and life-threatening trials, did the demons of Death’s Grip fight off Alessio and the forces of the Black Valley.

“And here I sit, forced to watch one of Zelandariel’s most prized gorgalas… cuddling.” Acelina gagged. David didn’t have to peek to know what that’d look like, especially considering Acelina’s featureless black face. “Caera, another of Zelandariel’s most honored, who slayed dozens of demons in her last battle against the Black Valley. You indulge in this pampering, as well.”

Caera growled. From what David knew of the tregeera, Acelina’s words probably had the tiger lady covering the mark on her shoulder with a hand.

“I was called by the horde,” Caera said. “And your bitch lover sealed it in. Not that you’d know what a horde call feels like, but it’s a thousand times worse than any sin aura, Acelina. This mark—”

David bolted up. “That mark!” Everyone stared at him. “Can I see that mark, Caera? Up close?”

She frowned at him, but her expression softened as realization donned. After a few painful seconds of silence, she nodded, prowled over to him, reached across Daoka, and set her hand between his legs. With her shoulder up close, he could see the mark, or the remains of it anyway, clearly defined on her dark red skin. A scar, now, but Caera said she got it a long, long time ago, and with how clearly its dark, sharp edges were still imprinted on her skin, it wasn’t going anywhere.

He held out a hand, and Caera flinched.

“Can I touch it?”

She frowned at him, but put her hand back. With freedom to really explore, he gently reached out and held her arm so he could balance as he leaned in, still sitting, and with his eyes only inches from the mark, he ran a finger down the strange curves.

Caera didn’t react. Thank god, because a pulse of information flooded David’s brain, and he squeezed her arm out of reflex.

“What is it?” she asked. “You look… You look like one of those crazy scientists in the movies.”

He stared at the rune until it overlaid the one in his mind. It glowed. Not the one on Caera, but the rune in his mind glowed as puzzle pieces snapped together. He could have drawn the rune and it would have meant nothing, but seeing it burned onto someone’s flesh hammered context into his brain and wrapped the undefinable rune in definition.

“Control,” he said. “It’s for control.”

“I told you,” Caera said, “it’s a horde seal. Zel used the power of the spire to summon the horde, and used spire tools to seal it in so it’d stay with me for a long time, even when out of range of the spire.”

“Y-Yeah, I get that. But… But…” He let go of her arm, stood up, and began pacing. “It’s more than just control. It’s control, and influence. It’s manipulation and domination. It’s…” Throwing up his hands, he paced faster. “It’s something!”

“Something?” Jes asked, eyebrow raised.

“Yeah. I’m sorry, I can’t explain it. It’s all in here”—he pointed at his temples—“and connecting to other runes. It’s like, there’s a ladder, or maybe a tower, and things are stacked on top of each other. But, not just like a pile of stuff, but a structure. Some things support other things. Some things are branches.” He pulled on his shaggy red hair. “There’s things about life and death, creation and destruction, and both of them sit on things like existence and non-existence. But, the words don’t do it justice! I can’t explain!”

“You were right, Caera,” Jes said. “He is one of those crazy scientists in the movies.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m saying, the rune Zel used, it’s… it’s something I can…” Scrunching his face up, he glared at the ground as he sank his fingernails into his scalp. “If I can just figure it out, I feel like… like I could… I don’t know. Something wants to click, and it’s not clicking. I gotta get it to click. It has to click or I’m going to—”

“Go crazy,” Jes said. “Yeah, we get it.”

“I’m… only a little crazy.”

The gargoyle laughed as she got up and gestured to Caera’s arm.

“So, the magic runes in your head are coming into focus and making more sense? Magic runes that your sister put there, and got sharper when you had that vision about a random girl dying? And seeing Caera’s horde scar help?”

“Yeah, yeah it did. Like, seeing how the things plug together helped make things click, and—”

“You can say click all you want, it ain’t gonna mean anything to a bunch of demons, David.”

He winced. It was true Dao and Jes weren’t the brightest people, but he didn’t want to think of them as dumb. He gestured to Caera.

“She—”

“I don’t go click,” Caera said, shrugging. “Puzzles? No thanks. I just like learning about history. No demons down here sit around contemplating math or physics or logic puzzles, David, me included.”

He sighed and sat next to Dao with a heavy thump.

“Have you seen people get stuck on puzzles in the scrying pool? Maybe movies where smart people get really—”

“Obsessive?” Jes asked, smiling.

“Yes, obsessive, about figuring something out. Some people, their brains just get stuck on trying to figure out how A and B fit together, and can’t stop. I’m one of those people. I’m that guy that will go insane if he knows two things should fit together, but can’t figure out how or why. Can’t eat or sleep sorta insane.” More than a few times, his obsessive need to figure something out had destroyed his school schedule, his sleep schedule, his eating schedule, all of it. Thankfully, that wouldn’t be a problem in Hell. Sleep was an on-off switch, and he didn’t need to eat often.

Getting lost in his thoughts and walking off a cliff or into an ambush, on the other hand, was definitely an issue.

“And you’re still sure this won’t be a problem?” Caera asked.

“I’m… I’m sure.” He stabbed his temples with his fingers. “Okay, not sure. But it doesn’t matter. I told you I’m going to help you and I will. I just need to… balance that.” Easier said than done. It hadn’t been so bad when he’d had no clue what the runes were about. After seeing the rune on Caera’s shoulder, some parts clicked into place, and that was good, and bad. He was now officially in obsession mode.

Daoka clicked, sat up, reached out, and pulled his head toward her. First she squashed his face against her breasts, and then guided him down until his head was on her lap. He lay out, let his limbs go limp, and closed his eyes as he rested on her. Claws slipped into his hair, and every tense muscle in his body melted as Daoka combed his hair and scratched his head.

“At least the boy has a head on his shoulders,” Acelina said. “If our lives are apparently in his hands, it is good to know he can see past his nose. Unlike—”

“I fucking dare you to finish that sentence,” Jes said. From the sudden breeze, she’d probably just flared her wings.

David didn’t look. Eyes closed, he took a deep dive into his brain, and the weird symbols that’d taken residence there. At the bottom, existence and non-existence. Runes branched up from there and created platforms, but what connected them was a concept, an idea, something his brain couldn’t get to click. And without the click, the runes floated around like helium balloons on strings. Only the rune on Caera’s arm held still, and the string that bound was now solid, like finally understanding why a mathematical equation did what it did.

Control was an evolution of intent and power, one of its children. One of many. And they pulsed as they teased him and his ignorance. If he could just make them click, click all the way down to the bottom, something would… something.

Something.

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~~Day 36~~

~~Mia~~

Vinicius healed fast, damn fast. It made sense, considering his history. If a proper child of one of the ancient ones took forever to heal, they wouldn’t last, not in a world where demons had little sense of self preservation and did everything they could to get more power, or food. A ragarin’s heart would probably do more than just give a demon a full stomach, according to Vin, but also strengthen them permanently. Every demon who saw him probably either feared him enough to stay away, or would try to kill him for that power.

She’d almost made a comment about kills earning experience points, and Vin was a boss monster. But, no point. He wouldn’t have gotten it.

They prowled along, Vin crouching so low he occasionally used his lower two arms to help him crawl over or around big rocks, bloodgrip vines, and the occasional ditch.

“The last time I did this,” Mia whispered, following behind close enough she could have grabbed his tail, “Diogo was escorting me to the spire. That’s how I met Adron and Hannah.” Saying the girl’s name didn’t hurt so much anymore. Time healed all wounds, and whatnot. Good to know that was still true in Hell. “We laid an ambush for some Cainites. It wasn’t pretty, but at least we didn’t torture them or anything.” That was a question she hadn’t asked, whether Vin did the torturing thing, partly because Vin probably wouldn’t answer, and partly because he might.

She didn’t want to know if her bodyguard delighted in more than just violence, carnage, murder, and battle. If he also indulged in rape and torture the way Valzanal did, that’d be too much. Hell was Hell, sure, but there was a limit.

Vinicius rumbled softly and said nothing.

“I’d appreciate it if we didn’t use that technique for hunting, by the way. Using me as bait, I mean. I get the impression one little girl sitting out on her own as bait for Cainites might end badly. I might just get shot by an arrow. Do Cainites have arrows? Or demons?”

The demon clicked once. From the pitch, she knew it as no.

“That’s good. I bet it’d probably be too hard for a human to draw a bow, anyway, if the weight of that vrat’s sword was any indication. Meera metal is so damn heavy. Is aera metal heavy, too?”

Another cluck deep in his throat, this time for yes. Unfortunately for her unknowing victim, Vinicius, he gave her yet another piece of information that slowly allowed her to piece together the child of Belial’s life puzzle.

So far she knew: he knew how heavy aera was; he was super old, maybe thousands of years old; he’d gone on giant massacres across Hell; he and the rider didn’t like each other; he and the woman in aera armor, who was suspiciously similar to the rider, knew each other, and Vin trusted her; and he’d tried to take the Death’s Grip spire from Zel, and lost. Summarized, she knew jack shit.

“You’re sure there’s food this way?”

He nodded upward, toward a curve in the mountain they headed toward.

“I recognize that tunnel,” he said. “Humans often hide inside.”

“I thought you said the tunnels change over the centuries.”

“They do.”

Sighing, she nodded, crouched low, and followed Vin down into a big ditch that led toward the mountain. Up and down, up and down, the Hell landscape of Death’s Grip was a mess of the vertical forever blocking the horizontal. You couldn’t just walk anywhere. You climbed everywhere.

They came to a steep cliff edge, and Vinicius began the climb. His black claws found grooves in the stone, as did his talons, and the giant began to — slowly — work his way up the surface. Any faster and he’d rip his wounds open again.

It wasn’t a scalable surface for Mia, and she had enough rock climbing experience to know. So she did the only reasonable thing: she grabbed onto some spikes on Vinicius’s giant tail and stood on the ones closer to the tip. It was big, thick, and sturdy enough the spikes coming out of it easily held her weight.

Vinicius growled down at her. She finger-waved up at him, and smiled. Not like her weight affected him at all, so no reason to not jump on. And sure enough, he climbed the surface and up over the edge onto new ground, big and wide enough for Vinicius to crouch down, and again begin the prowl toward their target.

Mia hopped off, followed behind, and looked up.

The fire sky opened up. Vinicius froze in his tracks and looked up as well, and all of Hell grew quiet, as a ring of metal ripped through reality and into existence. It started small, edges thick but radius tiny, spinning in place. It opened wider and wider over a few seconds, revealing the dark teeth along its inner edge. Wider, and wider, until a large building could have fallen through.

It was the portal to Hell, and it was opening right overtop the mountain they headed toward.

“Fortunate,” he said, and he marched forward.

“Fortunate?” she asked. “What—oh god.”

The screams were a choir, and they cut through the persistent, distant sound of the burning sky, until Mia covered her ears. Bodies fell from the hole, naked, twisting, crying, and they plummeted toward the mountaintop.

“People! Those people!” She sprinted and caught up to Vinicius. “We have to—”

“What?” he said with a snap and glared down at her.

“We have… to…” She gulped, and looked back up at the giant ring in the sky. Far as she could tell from what must have been a kilometer away, the people didn’t fall as fast as they should have. They’d land on the mountaintop, alive, confused, and desperate.

And unless there were any unmarked up there, every one of those people falling down into Hell deserved their fate. Supposedly. After three weeks in Hell, she wasn’t entirely convinced the afterlife was a good authority on morality, or that the way it did things was justified.

“Food,” Vinicius said, and he resumed the march.

“They’re—” She bit her tongue and shut up. She’d told Vin he was free to do demony things. That meant going up there and indulging in a slaughter.

Vinicius needed to eat. A lot. He was like a transport truck, a massive beast that needed massive amounts of fuel to function. And unfortunately for the people entering Hell, Mia had a mission, a big one, that relied on her transport truck-sized bodyguard keeping her alive.

More bodies poured out of the giant ring. It fucked with her brain seeing a ring that, from the side, didn’t have anything behind it, but where she could see through it, it showed the horrible rock and stone and spikes and death she’d seen on the way down when she’d fallen through. More bodies fell, screaming, crying, flailing, and disappearing over the lip of the mountain’s flat top still above Vin and Mia. She didn’t want to get closer to the screams, but Vin didn’t so much as hesitate.

The ring didn’t stay open long. In a short amount of time, it tightened, spinning faster and faster until it closed, and poofed out of existence.

The two of them climbed, walked paths, slipped between rocks in ditches, and weaved around boulders and unusual metal growths. Hell did love to show off her artistic talents, and her obsession with the macabre. Black skulls on metal poles, and more of them the higher they climbed.

“Does Hell drop new souls at this place often?” she asked, and she gestured around at the various metal poles growing out of the mountain rock. Hell did things like grow statues and stuff in areas where things happened, where intent or emotion came to dramatic conclusions, things like that.

Vinicius clicked yes.

“Then… we might run into other demons?”

“Yes. You will hide.”

“Hide. Right. Hide.” She could hide. Her silk wrap was permanently red now, so it blended into the red lighting and blood-stained rock and stones of Hell pretty well. Red hair and freckles helped, too!

She groaned. None of that would help much. If she was so much as spotted by anyone that wasn’t Vinicius, there was a very good chance she’d end up dead and eaten by a demon, or a Cainite. Her only option was to stay close to Vinicius, very close. That meant going up the mountain.

They got up there, and Mia found a boulder to hide behind, as Vinicius unleashed chaos.

No, wait, not unleashed. Joined. The top of the mountain was wide, football-field wide, mostly flat, with a raised circular edge of rocks and boulders. Nothing a person couldn’t climb over, but anyone who did met a sharp drop that was difficult to climb down. But that wasn’t the problem. The problem was the two dozen demons pouring up over the edge into the arena, and feasting.

How had she not seen them? Around twenty-five other demons ran around the scattering, screaming humans, and unleashed death on them with reckless abandon. Some vrats, lots of imps and grems, gargoyles, a couple tigers, a bat girl or two, a few brutes, and hundreds of humans running around in a panic. Worse than a panic, a horrified stampede that mostly went in a circle. Some desperate humans tried to climb over the rocks on the circle edge, but were quickly eviscerated; the demons didn’t eat them yet, but killed as many humans as they could. The only humans that were going to get out alive were the ones willing to run and jump over the rocks circling the mountaintop.

A few did. One of them even came Mia’s way, jumped almost straight at her, over her, and past her. The mountain was not kind, and the woman let out a death cry as she realized she’d just thrown herself down the side of a cruel, jagged mountainside. It was at least a fifty feet before she hit the ground, and kept going.

Mia forced herself to look down at her feet, and crouched as low as she could to the circle’s outer edge, along its outside. She’d seen enough of this carnage before, when she first came to Hell, and in half a dozen other places and times. But she had to pay attention, at least to make sure no one came at her, noticed her, tried to eat her, anything.

And no matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t help but peek, if only to see what Vinicius did. She shouldn’t have.

The demons didn’t use a sin aura. Maybe if they did, they could have convinced some humans to stand and fight. Maybe the other demons were too hungry to waste energy on one, even if it meant a meal escaping. Whatever the reason, there was no violence between the demons, and no sin aura to cause any.

It was like watching sharks work together to eat a school of fish. The blood flowed. Limbs flew across the air. Heads toppled. Guts coated the ground, and screams were cut short by—

“Crazy,” a voice said.

Mia squeaked and turned around. Oh fuck.

Beside her, squatted a demon. A man. An incubus.

“We meet again,” he said, smiling in that half seductive, half dangerous way the sex demons had a habit of.

“M-Meet again?” Oh shit oh shit. Scream? Call Vinicius for help? She’d gotten so distracted by everything, she’d stopped looking around herself to make sure no one had spotted her. And now she might just be a dead girl. Double fuck.

The incubus had a sword strapped to his back, and wore a few pieces of meera armor, a slab of the bent and crude metal across one half of his chest, and some random bits of it strapped to his arms and thighs. A few inches over six feet tall, he was, as all incubi were, absolutely utterly handsome and gorgeous. He had the long, straight, thin dreadlocks that were actually half-inch-thick black hair tendrils that ended in sharp tips, and combined with his masculine jaw and dreamy eyes, he looked straight off a book cover for a steamy romance set in some stereotypical tropical country where the men all clearly wanted to pleasure the lonely and sexually frustrated office lady who’d been forced to go on vacation by her boss because she worked too hard and never took care of herself.

“I was enjoying an orgy with Saldavin when you walked in. You were Zel’s new pet.”

“Oh. Oh! Um… hi?” Oh my. She’d seen a bunch of incubi with a betrayer girl, that first encounter. They’d been getting their dicks in her, anyway they could, and that’d included two in her poor ass. And considering their dicks had been nearly as big as a vrat’s, that couldn’t have been easy on the woman. But whoever she’d been, she’d loved it.

“Came here for the feast?” He gestured past the boulders they hid behind.

“No! No no. Vinicius needs to eat, and—”

The incubus’s eyes opened wide.

“Oh. Diogo was right. You escaped the spire with Vinicius.” With a weary sigh, the incubus peeked over the rocks, winced, and squatted down beside her again. “Scary.”

Incubi, or volarins according to Zel, had red skin with very little darkness to it. They were soft by demon standards, even muscular ones like the one in front of Mia. No wings, no spikes, just two small black horns, and mostly human feet with short black claws to match the ones on his hands. He did have a tail, though, long and skinny and ending in a tiny spade. The whole look matched his red and black demon eyes very well.

“Diogo… w-wait, Diogo? Diogo’s alive?”

The incubus gestured for her to quiet down.

“Yes, he’s alive. Missing an arm, but he’s the new spire ruler, regardless.” After a shrug, the incubus gestured to himself. “I’m Faustinus, by the way.”

“Faust?”

“Inus.” He smiled.

She smiled, too. No, wait. Do not trust!

“W-Why aren’t you killing me, then? I uh…” Shit, she said the wrong thing first. “I mean, what did Diogo tell you?”

“That there are two unmarked souls, short, red hair, freckles, and they are to be killed.”

“That… sounds about right, I guess. Then why aren’t you doing that?”

“Fuck Diogo, that’s why. He killed Leos.”

“Oh. So—” She winced and covered her ears as a feminine scream cut through the noise of violence only fifty feet away. Better to focus on this strange conversation than listen to that. This very lucky conversation. Any other demon might have just killed her on sight. Then again, any other demon was already in the arena, killing, or elsewhere, avoiding strong demons so they wouldn’t risk getting eaten, too. Why was this incubus talking to her, then? “So, you’re going to… pretend you didn’t see me?”

“Not like I can really risk doing anything to you. No way I’d chance pissing off a child of the Old Ones, especially not that one.” He shivered and poked his head up over the rocks again as the last of the human screams faded. “Now we see if peace lasts, or we get a massacre.”

“Get a massacre? Isn’t that what just happened?”

“No. That was preparing dinner.”

She frowned. “Those were people.”

The incubus stared at her, squatted down low only two feet from her, and smiled. Not the flirtatious smile he had on a moment before, but surprise, complete with a raised eyebrow that looked a little too much like a movie actor might do.

“I guess what everyone was saying was right. You’re soft.”

She frowned harder, her hardest frown possible. But even she knew her chipmunk face couldn’t be taken seriously, and sure enough, Faustinus chuckled. She couldn’t hear it over the roars and crunching bone.

“I’m not supposed to be here. In Hell, I mean,” she said. “But I’m not soft. Just because I have empathy, doesn’t mean I’m soft.”

“I guess you’re right, if you managed to live all this time.” He gestured to her forehead. “I remember when I saw you, I didn’t think much of it.”

“You were… kinda busy.”

The smile he gave in response was positively smoldering. Inhumanly smoldering. Even without using his sin aura, just being around an incubus was problematic, every motion of his eyes, lips, and hands laced with sexiness. If it weren’t for the slaughter, her mind would be wandering.

“Here for a meal?” he asked.

“No! No, but, aren’t you? Why aren’t you in there?”

“Because I’m an incubus, not a moron. Better to go after the souls that escape, and my friends and I will track them down and get our food that way.” He tapped his temple and gestured down the cliff edge. They couldn’t see the body from where they were, but from the sounds, there had to be more than a few souls who’d suffered a similar fate. “These feeding frenzies don’t always end up with the demons just walking off after eating. Sometimes, they get a little crazy, and demons turn on each other. I might be able to take an imp or grem in a fight, but fighting isn’t any vola’s strong suit.”

“Friends?”

“A few buddies of mine, hidden around here.”

“The… the same buddies I saw you with last time?”

Oh that smile. That evil, dastardly, handsome smile. He even winked.

“And,” he said, “that’s Vinicius, actual Vinicius in there. Zel’s… uh, what’s the name? Bogeyman?”

“Yeah, Bogeyman.”

“He knows he’s a wanted demon. He might think of killing every demon who sees him. So, in the name of self preservation, I’m going to carefully avoid your new friend, and just wait for the frenzy to be over.” Faustinus nodded with a quiet humph, before he peeked back up over the edge of rocks. “But, I think he’s satisfied with just… a dozen human hearts, at least.”

Mia gagged. “Please don’t tell me that.”

Faust squatted back down and tilted his head as he looked at her.

“It really bothers you.”

“Yes, it does. I told you—”

“It just surprised me, that’s all.” He put up a couple hands, surrendering. “I can feel that aura of yours, getting angry. Strange thing, that aura.”

“You’re telling me.” With a relaxed sigh, her crouch became a sit, back pressed to the wall of rocks they hid behind. “I’m surprised you’re talking to me, then, if you’re afraid of Vin.”

“I am, but I’m also pretty good at running away screaming for my life, you know.”

She laughed. Damn it, no laughing. She’d even told Vin her own naiveness might get her in trouble, and trusting an incubus who randomly showed up and introduced himself was a perfect example of trouble.

“If we’re wanted, what about the other demons? Are they gonna jump Vinicius? Try to kill him?”

“Maybe. But like I said, normally demons leave each other alone during and after a feast. Usually.”

“They won’t report back to Diogo that we’re out here?”

Faustinus gestured back toward the spire. The amber beam was gone, and mountains blocked sight of the huge tower.

“It’d take several days to report back. Several days to get back here. I only learned about what was going on from a gorgala gliding by and filling me in yesterday. You think you’ll still be here in a week?”

“No, I suppose not.” Sighing, she rubbed her eyes with her palms. “Hell is so… difficult. I’m spoiled by the internet. By the phone! Even radio would be a giant upgrade to this medieval world.”

“Medieval world in your favor. If I could just call up Diogo and tell him you’re here, I… still wouldn’t, because fuck that asshole.” He leaned in a little closer. “But there are plenty of demons who will try to kill you and Vinicius, and take your skulls back as proof. Just, not right now.”

“Will Vin kill all the demons here to prevent that?”

“Maybe. But, if he lets some live, they might just hunt you down again, with friends. And to Vinicius, that’s food coming right to him. Saves him the work of hunting down a meal.”

She rubbed her face some more. That’d already happened, and it’d nearly gotten her and Vin both killed. But, then again, Vin had been injured and starved when that happened. If Adron’s stories were true, Vinicius frequently fought demons by the dozens and came out on top. That was the Vinicius she needed, and if that meant she had to let him feast on dozens of souls and demons frequently, so be it. Demons doing demon things.

“Well, thank you, for telling me all this. We’re going… we’re going. I can’t tell you where.”

He shrugged. “Based on the direction, you’re going to the Black Valley. Makes sense, if you’re going to Alessio to get away from Death’s Grip.”

She sucked at lying, and she knew it, too. Better to just not say stuff and give things away.

“Maybe,” she said, nodding and folding her arms across her chest.

“Maybe?”

“Maybe.”

He raised an eyebrow. “And… what’s that necklace you’re wearing?”

“Nothing.”

He switched which eyebrow he raised.

“Alright, keep your secrets.” Laughing, his skinny tail reached out and waved at her with its spade tip. “Sounds like the slaughter is over.”

With a heavy nod, she gulped, and forced herself back to standing. Both of them peeked over the rocks.

Corpses. Hundreds of them. Cut in half, torn open, ripped into pieces, everything and anything the demons could do to get their hands on the hearts of the souls, they did. There was enough blood, it coated the ground of the arena, creating just enough depth that each step the demons took sent small ripples along the red liquid.

Mia did not look any of the bodies in the eye. She did not look at the numbers on their foreheads. She kept her eyes above the dead, and set them on the demons prowling around instead. All of them dripped with blood, rivers of crimson that ran down their mouths, necks, chests, and legs. But none of them compared to Vinicius, and the red that had splattered his entire body, head to toe, horn to talon.

Only one thing could have made blood splatter like that: ripping and tearing bodies over his head.

Vinicius stood in the center of the huge, circular platform, a slowly looked around at the rest of the demons. All of them stood far away, and all of them faced Vin.

The child of Belial rumbled in his chest, and the blood around his feet vibrated. Slowly, he turned in place, and looked at each demon as he flexed and unflexed the muscles of his hands. A silent challenge.

No one used their sin aura. All it’d take was one, just one demon who decided a fight was worth it, and the sin aura would snap the tension and send them into a frenzy. It didn’t happen. Instead, each demon walked away, leaving Vin alone in the mess of death and gore.

“Quite the show of dominance,” Faustinus said. “He—”

Vinicius snapped his dragon gaze to Faustinus and Mia, and ran toward them. His dinosaur feet hit the ground hard, and the blood splashed like mini tidal waves as he came at them. All of Hell shook with each step as the colossus ripped the ground underneath his talons.

He roared, and Mia squeaked

“Wait!” she screamed. “Wait! He’s not attacking!”

Was that even the reason Vin was suddenly ripping up a storm and ready to go on a slaughter? From the look in his dragon eyes, he was half a second away from summoning his aura and starting a fight. But Mia’s words punched through the heavy impacts of his feet and his harsh growls, and he slowed. And just like a semi truck, it took a while to slow down, and his own momentum took him right up to the edge of the death pit before he finally stopped.

Poor Faustinus. He had a hand over his shoulder, ready to grab his sword and draw it, and his tail was shivering, betraying the solid look in his eyes.

“What is a volarin doing at a feasting site?” Vinicius said, towering over them.

The incubus managed a small smile and smaller chuckle. He didn’t lower his hand.

“Getting leftovers. There’re always a few souls who escape but fall down the cliffs. My friends and I were watching, and then I noticed her.” He gestured to Mia with his free hand. “And felt like talking to her.”

“Which I greatly appreciate,” Mia said. “Most demons we run into just try and eat us, and Vin isn’t exactly… talkative.”

The four-armed demon dragon growled quietly, but at least he lowered his hands. A bit. He couldn’t get any closer without stepping over the rock barrier, and instead remained where he stood, waiting, watching, eyes never leaving the incubus.

“I just was telling the unmarked soul here that Diogo somehow became the new spire ruler.”

Vinicius rumbled and said nothing.

“That reminds me!” Mia clapped her hands together. “Zel had two demons watching me, before… things happened. Kasimiro and Adron. I know Adron was injured. Do you know if anything happened to them? Are they alive?”

Faustinus tapped his chin with his free hand. Despite his playful, Adron-like mischievous nature, he kept the other hand ready to grab his sword hilt. Not like he’d be able to do much to Vinicius, but still, he was braver than he’d said.

“What’s the information worth to you?”

“Uh, what?”

“What’re you willing to trade for it?” And with a frustratingly perfect amount of smoothness, he winked. He may have been similar to Adron, but his very human face made the subtle flirtatious motions so much more… intimate. With vrats and brutes and their demony skull-like faces, there was a certain distance, like she was looking at things out of a story. There wasn’t even a point in trying to read the expressions of someone like Kas, and Vin’s were more animal than anything, but the incubus in front of her was so very human, red skin, red eyes, and black horns aside.

So she kicked him in the shin.

“Nothing! I’ll trade you nothing.” She folded her arms across her chest, very thankful she kept the torn and half shredded silk wrap. It was still good enough to keep her bits out of sight, at least.

She glanced up at Vin. Vin growled, leaned in, and breathed. The hot air of his mouth poured over them, thick with the smell of blood, and drops of the red liquid fell from his teeth onto the stones Mia and Faustinus hid behind.

Faustinus chuckled. “Message received. Yes, the enforcer and the sneaky vrat are alive.”

Mia released a long sigh she didn’t know she’d been holding in, and tension melted from her muscles.

“They are?”

“Yeap.”

“Are they still at the spire?”

“Nope.”

She tilted her head. “No?”

“They left. I don’t know the details, but I saw Adron and Kas leave together.”

“Together is good!”

“Eh, not so good. Diogo has a standing order to kill them on sight, too.”

Oh no.

“Why?”

“Same reason he wants you and Vinicius dead, I guess. I wasn’t there. And speaking of.” The incubus looked up at Vin and lowered his hand from his sword hilt. “Don’t suppose you’ll let me go?”

“Let you go?” Groaning, Mia looked up at Vinicius. “You don’t have permission to eat him.”

He rumbled. “Your naivety will get you killed.”

She didn’t have to guess Vin’s reaction. Letting another demon see them was problematic, but having a conversation with one only to let them go meant a real risk. Now that Faust knew something about what they were up to, they really should have simply killed him.

Well, fuck that. Faust helped her. She would help him.

Mia waved Vin back. Vin rumbled again, deep and long, unhappy, but relaxed and pulled back.

“Much obliged,” Faust said. “And some words of advice, unmarked. Do a better job of hiding. Plenty of demons out there who’ll do exactly what your friend here thinks, especially to you.”

“But not you,” she said, smiling at him.

He returned the smile, but damn, his smile was so much better than hers.

“But not me. Diogo can burn for all I care. Isn’t that right, boys?”

Mia drew her head back and looked around. Right on cue, movement stirred in the distance, and the now very familiar sound of talons and feet hitting stone filled the silence as three other incubi stepped into view. Each one of them wore bits of black armor, and each one of them had a big black sword strapped to their back. The swords weren’t as big as the one Mia had used to feed Vin, but they still probably weighed twenty or thirty pounds. A ridiculous weight for a sword. Even incubi were inhumanly strong.

One incubus came closer and joined Faust’s side. A little taller, a bit more muscle, he also had a scar down the forehead across the cheek, and carried himself with a little more directness than his apparently younger friend.

“We just came for a meal, Faust. The fuck are you doing?”

“Introducing myself to the unmarked everyone’s talking about.”

The bigger incubi looked down at Mia, up at Vinicius, and then around the hillside at the two other incubi waiting nearby.

“Never thought I’d see a ragarin in my life,” the new incubus said. “And definitely never thought I’d see an unmarked soul. Diogo’s one temper tantrum away from summoning the horde and sending every demon in the province on a hunt to kill you. He says you and the child of Belial are responsible for Zel’s death.”

Mia squirmed. “Maybe.”

Faust laughed. “Alright, well, we should probably get out of here before shit happens.” With a sneaky wink for Mia, he gestured down the cliff side where at least one human had jumped to their death. “Let’s go. Stay out of trouble, Mia.”

Faust walked off, though his friend stayed behind for a second and spent it looking Mia up and down. Satisfied, he gave her the same sort of frustratingly smooth, perfect smile all incubi were apparently masters of, before he gave Vin a sort of half-bow as he rejoined his friend.

“Let’s go,” Vin said once they were gone.

“Uh, yeah. Good idea.”

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Once they had some distance between them and the massacre, the mountain peak above and behind them, Vin spoke up.

“You were lucky.”

“I know.”

He glared at her over his shoulder. “You should have called for my help.”

“Because of Faustinus?”

“Yes. He could have killed you.”

Part of her wanted to poke him — verbally — for making it so obvious he wanted to keep her alive, despite his selfish asshole attitude. But teasing someone for doing something you wanted them to do was a recipe for stopping that behavior; thank you psych 101. Still, his desire to keep her alive was something she wanted to figure out. Did he want to keep her alive because he was curious about her, or because he trusted the woman in aera armor and wanted to save the world, if only to save himself? It could have been a bunch of things, and she’d poked that bear enough. For now.

“You were busy, and judging from the last time you got into a fight and… did demon things, I wasn’t sure I could trust you to not accidentally kill me, too.”

He growled. “I saved you last time.”

“Yeah, and… and thank you, but, you’re… scary, you know? You were really scary, when killing those demons.” She hugged her arms close to her chest. “But you’re right. I fucked up. I should have hid better, and trust you next time.” When Vin had run over with full intent on killing Faust, Mia had stopped him. Whether she could do that when Vin was in full battle mode against other demons while on a full belly, she didn’t know. If she paid more attention, she wouldn’t have to find out.

He watched her with one eye as he navigated the winding path deep between two mountains, but didn’t rumble or growl or groan. Maybe he was surprised she admitted fault?

“I thought,” she said, “that all the demons would be up there on the mountain where the souls were, joining you in the… feast.”

“That… is what normally happens.”

Oh ho ho! He was admitting fault, too! Sorta, kinda, barely. But hey, that was a lot more awareness than she expected of the child of Belial.

“Lesson learned,” she said. “Demons aren’t always so easy to predict. At least the incubus was nice.”

“He was looking for a way to exploit you. If I wasn’t there, he would have taken you.”

“I don’t know. He seems to have a real issue with Diogo for killing someone named Leos. And with Diogo in charge, it sounds like Faust’s gonna be a thorn in Diogo’s side when he can.”

Vin groaned and rumbled, but relented with a nod.

“Very lucky,” he said.

“Agreed. Super lucky! Kas and Adron are alive! And they left the spire!” She hopped in place a few times as she caught up to Vin. Maybe it was the excitement, or maybe she just felt she knew Vin well enough now, but before she knew it, she leapt up and grabbed onto the spikes on his back.

Vin didn’t so much as slow down. He turned his head enough to peek over his shoulder down at her, and growled annoyance, but didn’t knock her off as she climbed up his back. Barely a 5.2 on the rock climbing scale, and it took her no time at all to get behind his head and toward his right shoulder. She held onto the big spikes coming off the shoulder, while she pressed her body against the hard muscle between his back spikes. And of course she made sure her eyes cleared his shoulder so she could watch the path ahead.

“They’re alive,” she said. “They’re alive, and they’re not happy about Diogo.”

“No one is happy a pathetic devorjin now rules Death’s Grip.”

“Pathetic? He was missing an arm and still tried to fight the rider. That was impressive. Courage—”

“Demons do not have courage. They have power, and hunger.”

“I dunno. Maybe? Well, either way, you’ll have an easy time taking the spire when you come back here then, right?” With a happy squeak, she patted his shoulder. “They’re alive! Maybe we’ll run into them? If you spot a vrat with a dinosaur, a—”

“Dinosaur?”

“Dino—oh, you actually probably don’t know what those are, do you? Probably not big in scrying pools way back when. I meant Adron the vratorin, and Kas the sarkarin. Can’t be too many pairs of those wandering around Hell, right?”

“It would take a lifetime to explore the tunnels in Death’s Grip alone. We won’t find them.”

“Nah, come on, don’t say that. I bet we’ll stumble onto them. And—”

Mia and Vin snapped their heads up. Shadows cut across the sky, fast things in a strange shape Mia had not seen above her since she’d been alive.

Wings. White wings.