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The images vanished, Caera's face cutting through the blurring fog until all that remained was the cave, its amber veins, and her. But the memories remained.

"I... I saw..." Blackness yanked him down, and buried him in its grip.

~~~~~@wW.mOvE1w0r.C0m

~~~~~

--Mia--

The rest of the hike to the spire was uneventful, kinda. Nothing attacked them, and none of them expected anyone to, either. In the valley, they were 'safe', as Adron put it, complete with air quotes. No reason for them to look behind them, or maintain a perfect formation, but that also meant they were more free to glare back at Mia and give her the stink eye.

They didn't trust her. They hadn't ever trusted her, but now they didn't trust her in that 'this little girl is dangerous' kinda way, which was a very strange feeling. She'd never had anyone look at her like she was dangerous. Quite the opposite, in fact. Being barely five feet tall had meant a life of people thinking she was completely harmless; one of the reasons she'd gotten into resistance training. Alas, a little muscle on her thighs and curve on her butt hadn't really helped make people fear her on Earth's surface, and certainly wasn't helping her in Hell. But now she was, apparently, not exactly human, and had an aura they all feared quite a bit.

At least they stopped checking to see if she tried to run. The valley was wide and mostly flat, making any attempt to run and hide pointless. Well, maybe she could hide, but considering the sights before her, that wasn't happening(w)w.moreF0r.m.c0m

She came closer to Hannah and Adron, and closer, until she almost touched their sides with her shoulders. Eyes wide until the hot air stung, she gulped hard, and slowly stepped around Adron to put him between her and one of the big spikes sticking up out of the ground. A big, black spike, more of that black stone she'd heard the meera metal was made of. And skewered on it, was a person, a human. The spike was thin enough that whoever killed the man had made sure the spike had gone up between the legs... and out the mouth.

She covered her mouth and forced her eyes in another direction. Fucking christ, was Vlad the Impaler still alive down here?

It didn't get any better as they got closer to the spire. More spikes, many with a corpse on them, and many of the bodies weren't human. Dead tigers, dead vrats like Adron, a dead gargoyle, a dead satyr, and a few dead big brute boys, too. How the hell did someone get one of those brutes onto a spike that stuck up twelve feet in the air? They were huge! But someone had, or someones, and the dead demons had spikes going straight up through their whole body. Most of the corpses were skeletons, but plenty were new.

"What... What happened?" she asked.

"Zel doesn't tolerate dissidence," Adron said, gesturing to a nearby spike with his tail. "Don't step out of line and you won't wind up on one of these spikes. Try and dodge the call of the horde, though, and she'll do worse than sink you on a spike."

Mia should have seen this coming. Of course a ruler of Hell would be more than capable of enforcing their rule, and plenty happy to be brutal about it. She didn't bother asking if these humans and demons had been alive when put on the spikes. She knew.

There was more than spikes, too. Hell had a motif, and it -- or she -- stuck to it like a goth teenager utterly convinced they had to wear their new sense of fashion with religious devotion. The mountains in the distance were dotted with burning bushes, with more than a few of them sticking up from some rocky areas in the valley. It was the black skulls that gave her pause though, hundreds, maybe a few thousand of them, sticking up out of the ground on black poles five feet tall. The skulls were demon skulls, complete with big fangs and big defined jaws, but they didn't exactly fit any of the demons Mia had seen so far. Either way, they were spread out perfectly and evenly, in a circular shape around the spire. And according to Adron, they hadn't been carved or crafted. They'd grown.

A few amber veins ran along the ground, but rarely, as if they preferred the jagged mountains to flat ground. Except for one particular spot where a few dozen of them converged, and disappeared into a crack in the ground.

"What's that?" Mia asked, pointing to the spot.

Adron smiled down at her and walked toward the crack. Stopping shy of it, he gestured.

"Don't fall."

Oh, don't fall, no problem. Not like she was in Hell and any misstep could easily spell her instant death.wW.m(c)0e1w0Rm.c0M

She approached, stopped, squinted up at the smiling demon, grabbed his tail, and came closer. Of course he just laughed, but he also didn't yank his tail free as she approached the big crack in the dark stone.

It was only a couple feet wide, but it also went a few hundred feet along the ground, begging for someone to forget it existed, fall in, and die. And they would die. The heat pouring up from the crack was immense, and she could only stick her head out for a second before she had to yank it back. Hell's hot breezes bothered her eyes sometimes, but the waves of heat coming up from deep below were far worse. That, was lava, bright and flowing deep in the earth. Not Earth. Hell.

"Lava. This is the stuff inside the amber veins?"

"Yeap."

"You said it was Hell's blood?"

"We call it lava," Adron said, "but some demons call it liquid hellfire. And a few call it the blood of Hell." Shrugging, he gently pulled back on his tail, drawing Mia away from the crack. He'd been close enough there'd been no danger of her falling, but she held onto the tail regardless.

"Come," Diogo said, and he continued on. How nice of him to give her a whole five seconds to check something out.

Everyone fell back into the group, and they walked between the skull brazier poles toward the spire. Spire was a weird word for it, fitting and not. It was a tower, and it had a pointed top, but it was more like... like... there wasn't a word for it. A growth? Whatever the thing was, it had slabs of black stone at the base, but it also had entire sections of... flesh, covering chunks of the black. Almost as if one of the much smaller black spikes surrounding Mia had grown a million times too big, and was covered in fleshy alien growth. Flesh, and bone. White sections reached up high across it, looking way too much like the side of a bone being exposed from underneath the muscles that coated it. And every so often, a giant balcony circled the entire tower, something made of more black stone, and black metal too, but with white claws sticking off the edges, claws that must have been bigger than her entire body.

"Is that... flesh?" she asked. Now that the tower was only a kilometer away, she could see the red and white stuff weren't more rock, but actual bone and muscle. It wasn't a trick of the eyes. With each step they came closer, it only got worse. The flesh chunks on the outside didn't hold still, but pulsed every so often, like a heartbeat. Like... Hell's heartbeat?

Screeching grabbed her eyes, and she froze as a few hundred pairs of wings took to the air. The lowest of the circling metal balconies erupted in movement, and more than Mia stared up as wings blocked out the sky of fire. Demons were everywhere. Imps and grems jumped from the spire and glided overhead, spiraling over Mia and the group, many cackling, many chirping and clicking, all of them making noise. A few glided over to the crack in the stone ground, grabbed the hot air under their wings, and went higher. Many landed and perched on a spiked corpse, took a bite, and hopped away, scampering on the ground. Hundreds of them waited, and watched Diogo. They recognized him.wW.N0v0l(w)cRm.c(c)m

The base of the huge spire had cave-like entrances, covered in white spikes she had to assume were bone, with entrances lit by dangling skull braziers hanging from chains covered in more spikes. Too far to see into the entrances, but demons came and went by the dozens, big ones and small ones, some she recognized some she didn't. More than a few times bat-like demons, skinny women about six feet tall with no arms, came wandering out of the spire, turned around, and climbed up the spire's side with their wing claws. Some hung upside down from the balcony overhead. One demon came out, a beast of a man that walked on all-fours despite probably being able to walk upright, and he looked their way. Like the satyr demons, he didn't have eyes, but instead had big horns that connected to the black bone covering where eyes would normally be. But the horns came out to the side, and his snout was long and came to a point. A shark? With horns?