

## 1140

Why wasn't anyone greeting them? Or rolling out the red carpet for Diogo, or doing anything to show they knew he was coming? Oh, right, because they didn't. Hell didn't have phones. Their arrival was a surprise, and plenty of demons stopped what they were doing to watch, probably trying to figure out why they'd come.

Mia did her best to keep her aura under control. Suppressing the tingling vibration in her was easy for the moment, considering the last thing on her mind right now was sex. The giant valley full of corpses on spikes, wandering and staring demons, and the enormous spire before her that looked like it might have come out of Hellraiser with a bloody makeover? All she felt was icy, stinging chills in her spine.

Closer and closer, until the spire stood towering over them. It was way too big. It had to be bigger than any skyscraper on Earth, but not wide enough to deal with a hard breeze. Not that it wasn't wide, but not wide enough for the insane height. But as they closed in on the final distance, she looked down at where the bone, flesh, and black stone of the spire's base sat on the ground. It didn't sit on the ground. It grew up from the ground.

And then they were inside. And Hell really showed herself. *W( )W( )LWOrM. Com*

Inside the spire, the world changed. Death's Grip was a huge province hundreds of kilometers wide as far as she could tell, and it was all cliffs, deadly jagged mountains and canyons, with ravines filled with screaming dying remnants, and skull braziers, amber veins, and burning bushes keeping the province lit, not to mention the burning sky. But in the spire, it was a world of flesh, and bone, and sharp metal.

The enormous room, bigger than a hockey stadium -- maybe as big as a football stadium? -- was like the inverse of the outside of the tower, with a balcony along the inside, and a giant hole in the center, going both up, and down. The balconies on the spire's outside were spread out vertically, maybe a hundred meters between each, but on the inside, it looked like there were ten times as many inner balconies circling the big hole in the center. She and the group approached the inner edge of the balcony they stood on, it was clear there were far more inner balconies above her, hundreds... and far more below.

She sucked in a hard breath as she peeked over the edge of the balcony, and stared down into the pit. Down, and down, and down. If there was a bottom, she couldn't see it.

Adron pulled her back. "Careful." *W( )W. No Oel( )ORm. ( )om*

"Oh... right." For just a second, fear of falling to her death had been replaced with awe. There were no railings. Each balcony, a flat platform circling around the giant hole in the middle of the tower, had short black spikes that came up at the edge, hardly protection from falling.

From the edges of the balconies, imps and grems hopped and glided up and down the balconies to different floors, and sometimes bigger demons did, too. Cages dangled by chains from the balcony edges, with demons often using them as jumping points or landing points as they went up and down. It was like the inside of Diogo's cave, except a thousand times worse. Inside the cages were one, two, sometimes six remnants, stacked against each other and clawing out against the air as they groaned. A few of them did more than groan. They called for help, with words, normal sounding words. Not all remnants? Humans locked into the cages maybe, left to die slowly?

The walls were a different story. Not metal, and the black stone was mostly covered by huge slabs of red that, yes, was actually pulsating muscle. She drifted toward the wall, and Diogo and the group let her, apparently distracted with their own chatter while Mia approached the tall surface of flesh and bone. White bone spikes jutted from the flesh, and around where the metal floor connected to the wall. Several remnants squirmed, bodies half merged into the flesh wall, and more than a few with a spike puncturing through their abdomens, but they weren't dying, yet. They weren't going anywhere.

The occasional amber vein cut along the flesh and white bone, but they were rare. The wall of flesh almost looked like it was trying to hide the amber, instead preferring to show flesh, and in certain places, blood. The flesh wasn't perfect. It was cut and bleeding in certain places, or torn by bone spikes or the metal floor, or by a big metal hook that had a heartless demon corpse skewered on it.

"Creature," Diogo said.

Mia snapped around. Diogo was looking at her, Adron too, and everyone, and more. A dozen demons had shown up, some naked, some wearing armor and skulls, some wearing brown leather cloaks, some wearing some sort of white, partly see-through silk. More demons showed up, and more, and they all stared at her.

"Me?" Of course her.

"Follow." He gestured toward the path ahead of him, and he walked.

No point in arguing, and his heavy voice punched through her stupor like a slap. She jogged for a second, caught up, and walked behind the juggernaut brute as he moved toward what looked like a stairway in the flesh wall. A peek behind her solidified her worry. The others weren't coming, not even Adron.

Adron winked at her though, and waved at her, subtly with his claws but a wave everyone noticed anyway. He didn't think she was going up those stairs to die? Better than nothing.

The stairs weren't metal, or black stone. She'd figured they would be, but nope, she walked on big wide horizontal slabs of bone. Not fake bone, like something carved to look like it. It was bone. Her feet recognized the texture, and if she got down and licked it, it'd probably feel like the t-bone of a steak. Surprisingly pleasant to walk on, with a gripping texture that stopped her from slipping while also being much easier to walk on than metal or rocks. But, still, bone, ugh.

The stairway turned in a smooth half circle, connecting to the metal balcony above, where Diogo took another left and into another stairway. And then again on the next floor, and again. Sometimes she had to push aside dangling metal chains, and the skulls attached to them. Sometimes she had to fight her way past a remnant Diogo hadn't bothered killing for her. Sometimes a demon blocked the stairs by chance, and quickly stepped aside for Diogo, only to stare at her in confusion. And sometimes, a drop of blood fell onto the path, forcing her to look up at where the mix of flesh and stone didn't always play nice with the metal spikes.

Each time they reached the next floor, she looked across the metal balcony circling the big hole in the middle of the tower. There were rooms attached to the sides, with archway tunnels accepting demons into them. Sometimes she heard screaming coming from them. Sometimes moaning. Sometimes both.

Up and up and up. Diogo took his time, probably in no hurry to tire himself out scaling a colossal building like this. Mia's legs burned, though. Sweat dripped down her naked body, and she breathed hard. The smell of blood, either from the tower or from hungry demons, disappeared under her exhaustion. Walking kilometers upon kilometers for four days? Hard but doable. Scaling a skyscraper's worth of stairs? Hell's ultimate torture, reserved for only the most horrible, cruel humans.

Thankfully they didn't scale the whole thing. Maybe about halfway up, and Mia absolutely convinced her afterlife body was going to disintegrate from exhaustion and heat overload, they stopped. And it was obvious why. On the other side of the circling balcony, across the pit, was a giant skull. Black metal, with fire burning in its eyes, and mouth open. The skull was tilted and its mouth open wide, clearing maybe fifteen feet of height, meaning Diogo had no trouble stepping through it once they finally got to it. *W( )O. n( )v( )LW( )rm. OOm*

She followed through, stepping over the sharp teeth poking up from the floor where the skull's jaw would have been if the balcony hadn't been there.

The spire's throne room made the big cave Diogo had look like a child's papier-mâché cosplay version. A large throne sat in the back of the huge room of metal and stone, something made of bone. It was an arrangement of bones made to fit the shape of a big, fancy throne, and even weirder, was some of the bones could have only fit that throne. The fuck sort of creature would have bones like that? No creature, that's what kind. They were throne bones.

The walls were mostly stone, with more amber veins Mia had oddly found herself missing. The floor was stone, with chunks of flat metal floor underneath, and fucking titanic rib bones poking up just enough she had to step over them. Cages with remnants inside dangled from the high ceiling. Black metal skull braziers hung from the cages. On the walls, more spikes jutted out, and a few humans and demons were skewered on them, in the process of dying... slowly. Oh god oh god oh god.

Diogo walked forward, casually stepping over the giant bones, past the big stone tables with blood and gore all over them, past the chairs made of bone complete with chair-specific bones, and past the huge pool off to one side that was absolutely blood. Thick blood, not like the Adam's Blood river. Heavy crimson blood that flowed down from the mouth of a giant white skull in the ceiling.

"Diogo," the demon woman on the throne said.

"Zelandariel," Diogo said, and he nodded. Deep nod. Fuck, that was a bow. For some reason, seeing the stoic, juggernaut brute bowing to someone, was scarier than the spire and all the horrors Mia had seen so far.

Zel stood up, and stepped down the shallow metal stairs down onto the stones in front of Diogo, and Mia slipped a few inches more behind the brute.

Zel was taller than him. Maybe a foot taller. She stood on black hooves, and while she had no tail or wings, she had four arms, each ending in an assortment of very large black claws. White silk draped over her, a few scarves of it that hung loosely and did a poor job of hiding her thin, fit physique, moderate breasts, and slab of abs. Her face was slim, sharp, and she had no nose. Four enormous black horns pulled up and away from her forehead, curling back over her skull like a strange, glorious, alien crown. From underneath her horns, long black hair tendrils dangled from her skull and reached past her ass, and considering how tall she was, that was damn long.

She was alien and beautiful and odd and majestic. And terrifying, especially with the strange, lightly glowing amber horn sticking straight up from her forehead. And she'd pierced the thick hair tendrils with bones, tiny ones. Finger bones? Human finger bones? Mia took a step back and--

"You," Zel said, red and black demon eyes snapping to her, "are... not marked?" Slowly, the beautiful alien demon queen licked her lips. *W( )W. No v( )LORm. Com*

Shit.