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

"Thanks."

"And be careful with polite words. Few demons understand their meaning." *wWw.N@eLwOrM.c@m*

"Sorry."

Zel looked over her shoulder to her, eyebrow raised *Ww@.m@eLwOrM.c@m*

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

"Learn to jump."

"Uh..."

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

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

"Guardian?"

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

They went to the battle room.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Why... were they fighting?"

Zel shrugged. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Mia looked down and gnashed her teeth together a few times. Stop it *Ww.novélw@r.m.c@m*

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