

### 1167

"Some time during the first age," Acelina said, shrugging. "Hundreds of thousands of years ago."

"Oh." Well, shit. This was beyond normal for demons, then. It wasn't some band-aid solution for their shitty circumstances, but an aspect of their civilization older than anything any human civilization considered integral to their culture. No wonder demons were all either really fucking nasty, had strange senses of humor, or were carved out of wood. Anyone who survived a childhood like this had to be strong, and twisted.

It was in a spire's best interest to only let strong demon children survive, if the demon children were to grow up and defend the spire from other spires. That was a thing, according to Adron, that spires occasionally fought, and if they didn't want to get destroyed, the spire ruler needed to be strong and summon a horde who could fight the invading force. Or, of course, be the invading force.

"So spire mothers help?"

Acelina shook her head. "Only until the egg has finished hatching. Otherwise it would defeat the purpose. They must reach maturity on their own."

"Then what do mothers do? You just... watch?"

"Watch, and once they reach maturity, we remove them, examine them, ensure they meet the standards we deem, and we explain the rules of Death's Grip."

Pavia joined Acelina's side. "And treat them right, if they're old enough and have done particularly well."

Both ladies chuckled and grinned. Big, evil, scary smiles. But at least Pavia seemed a bit nicer.

Well, Mia had answers to her questions, they just weren't very nice ones. For some stupid reason, that'd surprised her. Something about knowing demons had children, eggs, and they hatched and stuff, had given her weird mental images of demons... not being horrible? Like maybe a weird little family, hatching eggs and hunting for their children and stuff, feeding the babies... okay, feeding them human hearts, so still not the nicest image but damn well better than this. Even as she thought about it, she stared down over the wall at the demons, and a fight erupted deep in the pit. Seven young demons tore into each other. Only five walked away.

"Do hellbeasts spawn here?"

"No," Pavia said. "Hellbeasts have their own hidden little dens where Hell births them. But the spires are the creations of Lucifer, so we are told. And we demons are Lucifer's children."

Right, Zel had said that. Demons were the children of Hell, and Lucifer. If Lucifer created the spires, and the spires grew -- literally -- out of Hell, then it all kinda made sense. Much as anything made sense in the afterlife anyway.

"Kas, I think I'm ready to go back to my room. I--" She blinked as she looked past the two tall ladies, and to the glowing runes written on the wall of bone in the back, high above the pit. Someone had somehow managed to write something with amber veins.

Slowly, she walked past the two demon ladies, and did her best to not notice how her head only reached their stomachs. She walked along the edge of the pit, and circled the giant hole until she reached the huge runes in the bone. How did you write runes with amber veins? She'd seen normal runes carved into stuff, etched, scratched, and all of them had been Estian. This wasn't Estian.  
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"The ancient language," Pavia said, coming up to stand beside her. "Written into the bones of Hell long ago. Probably when Lucifer created the spires."

"Ancient language..." Was it ancient? It didn't look worn down. It looked brand new. Probably because it was written in what was literal veins of lava encased in some sort of thin, impervious magical glass.

And she could read it.

"The bowels... of Death's Grip... breeds the swarm of the mountain." Mia looked up at Pavia. "Uh, what's that mean? I mean, I guess Death's Grip is a lot of mountains and... and why are you looking at me like that?" Even without eyes, or any facial features really, Pavia's slightly parted mouth looked very stunned.

Mia looked back at Acelina and Kas. Both of them had open mouths, too.

"You can read this?" Pavia asked.

"Yeah. It's weird though. It's not English--er, I mean, Estian. It's some other language?"

Kas came up to her, grabbed her arm, and pulled her toward the exit.

"Come with me."

"W-What? Hey, ow! Jesus, let go! I'm coming already!"

He let go, and she rubbed her wrist as she stumbled after her big dinosaur bodyguard. A quick glance back showed Pavia and Acelina, still staring at her with mouths open.

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"She can read the ancient runes," Kasimiro said.

Zelandariel, standing by a big stone table in her throne room, turned and faced them, one eyebrow raised.

—"Excuse me?"

Kas gestured to Mia. "She can read the ancient runes. Unless she was lying, she read the ancient runes over the hatching pit."

The demon queen's eyes lit up, and her smile turned absolutely evil, and excited, the sort of smile a dominatrix would wear when successfully getting their sub off. It was unnerving.  
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"Did you now, little soul." Zel sauntered up to her, and squatted down in front of her so they could be face to face. Two of her arms rested on her knees, but the other two reached out, and gently held Mia's shoulders. Intense, disturbing eye contact, the black sclera of Zel's eyes fully circling her red irises as she opened her eyes wider.

"I wasn't lying. I... didn't think that'd be such a big deal."

"It is another piece of the puzzle. An important one. An essential one." Nodding, Zel leaned in closer. The woman was literally over twice as tall as Mia, and proportional; her head was twice as tall as Mia's, too, twice as wide, twice as deep. It was like being inches away from the face of a goddess alien cosmic horror creature, happy to bite her face off, or her entire head off, if she said the wrong thing.

"I... didn't realize," she said.  
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"I am sure you've realized by our reactions the we can neither speak nor read the ancient language."

Holy shit.

"No, I hadn't realized that."

"You would have learned sooner or later. It is no secret." Nodding, Zel stood up and looked to Kas. "Fetch me Adron."

Kas clicked once, and left, walking off a little faster than he normally did, on all fours with his big tail slowly swaying behind him.

"I was busy," Zel said, "if you were wondering why I had not come to visit you. But this is more important. You will be coming with me, now.  
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Mia shivered, rubbed her arms, and nodded. Not like she could deny Zel, but the evil smile the spire ruler had worn a moment before hadn't exactly filled Mia with comfort.

"Alright. And, why fetch Adron?"

That might have been a bit too far. She could get lippy with other demons because Zel had declared Mia off limits, but getting mouthy with Zel herself was playing with fire. But thankfully Zel thought her attitude was cute, and she giggled as she grinned at her.

"Because Adron, the sneaky little devil, is someone I can trust, both in talent and in loyalty. I did not know what use you could provide me before this discovery, save for one to be explored later. But now, I have many ideas, and I will not risk your death. I am doubling your guard."

"Oh." Oh god, Adron, and Kas? "And... Hannah?"

Zel shrugged. "She is Adron's pet. I see no issue if she joins him."