

## 1174

Higher and higher they climbed, until they stopped on a cliff edge that faced out toward the valley. It was sloped inward toward the mountain, perfect for getting on their stomachs and peeking out over the valley without all the gliders spotting them.

"Eggs," Caera said as she crawled forward, lay on her stomach, and gestured out to the spire in the distance. "Hell lays the eggs." [www.novels\(1\)w.r.com](#)

"Hell?" He lay beside her, and scanned around as best he could. It was getting late, too late.

He couldn't see over the mountains around the valley, except to the counter clockwise direction and the Black Valley. The vortex was visible too, just barely, a tiny little slit in the distance past the spire, past the mountain behind it, hundreds, maybe thousands of kilometers away. Death's Grip supposedly had the tallest mountains, but climbing the tallest mountain just to get a peek of everything was at the bottom of the list of things he wanted to do right now.

"In the spire," Caera said. "There's a place where eggs are laid by Hell and her flesh. Spire mothers take care of them, hatch them, put them in the pits, and whoever survives the pits until adulthood gets to leave." [www.novels\(1\)w.r.com](#)

"Whoever... survives."

Dao lay beside him, and clicked a few times.

Jes lay beside Dao, opposite of him. "Yeah, it's pretty rough. But after about a year, and a dozen or so kills, you're free."

"Wait. Demons are locked up in this pit place, for a year? And you kill... and eat each other?"

Caera nodded. "It's a big pit, lots of tunnels and caves. And sometimes the spire mothers will throw down some fresh meat for us, some souls to eat. But, yeah."

Information overload. Hell laid eggs, herself. Some apparently busy demons called spire mothers helped hatch the eggs. Then they put them in something called 'the pit' until they were mature enough to leave, which was apparently around a year. And Jes said earlier something about 'getting a taste'. So many questions.

"Okay," he said, "so, lots of balconies on the outside. Demons gliding down to lower balconies. How do they get up?"

"Balconies on the inside," Jes said. "A lot more, with a big hole in the center of the tower, all the way up, all the way down. There's stairs, too, but demons just jump."

"No wonder you all have such amazing legs."

All three girls chuckled. Wow, he managed a decent compliment in the flow of a conversation. Mia would have been proud.

"The hole goes deep into the ground, too," Caera said. "As deep as the spire is tall."

"Jesus."

Jes nodded, outstretched her wing over Dao, and poked David in the shoulder with her thumb claw.

"Zel has a lot of rooms she likes to live in, sleep in, fuck in, and collect her trophies and jewelry in. Mia's probably in one of those rooms, higher up."

"Upstairs then," he said. "You don't think Zel will lock her up in a dungeon or something?" Or worse.

"Nah," Jes said. "Zel can be a cruel bitch sometimes, but she prefers playing games and having fun with her pets. She'll want Mia's cooperation."

"And if Mia doesn't give it to her?"

"Then she'll torture the fuck out of her and make her wish she was dead."

His stomach flipped, but Dao rubbed her horns against his shoulder and chirped a few times.

"Dao's right," Caera said. "Zel plays the long game. She won't resort to torture unless she has to."

David gestured out to the valley below. "And all the corpses I'm seeing on spikes?"

"Zel makes examples out of demons -- and souls -- who step out of line," Jes said. "If they're on a spike, they probably deserve it."

"Probably," Caera said, "but... not always."

Before David could groan, Dao poked him in the shoulder, and gestured to the side, away from the valley, and toward one of the nearby mountains. With a few quiet clicks, she inched back from the edge of the cliff, pressed her body against the mountain wall, and again nodded toward the other cliff.

David stared at it, and waited. Sure enough, a shadow shifted. Death's Grip was nothing but solid rock, and any shifting shadows were mild and sporadic, cast by the flickering flames of burning bushes, or the sky of fire and its ambient waves of light. No shadows just 'shifted' unless whatever they were attached to was alive and moving. [www.novels\(1\)w.r.com](#)

Caera, Jes, and David followed after Dao. David nudged Caera, pointed at his eyes, then up at the distant cliff edge with the shadow, and then at her. It took her a second, but nodded, and climbed. She was the better climber, and every motion she made was a perfect prowl, claws navigating the stones immaculately. The rest of them followed whatever path she took, knowing it'd be the best path with the least chance of making noise, or falling and breaking a limb.

What Caera had said about Kia and Marquez weighed heavier on David with each moment. The tiger lady really was used to having companions she took care of, and every motion she made, she did making sure it'd be a good path for the people following her to take. She was good at taking point. She was used to being a leader and taking care of her friends.

It took a bit of time, but she got them up to another flat area with a lip they could lay on and look out over the other mountain with the suspicious shadow. Even better, there was enough space between them and the distant mountain they could whisper to each other without risk of being heard. Probably.

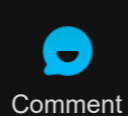
"What... the fuck is that?" David asked. [www.novels\(1\)w.r.com](#)

There was a goot. He'd seen some goots, big scary horse-like creatures, but this goot was enormous, bigger than a work horse, and completely black. Even scarier was it had armor, slabs of bronze metal crafted and shaped to perfectly fit the giant creature's thick musculature. War horses from human history would have been jealous of its bronze armor, the red gradients in it, the gold engravings of demon skulls, and the silver horns that came out of it.

That wasn't the typical meera metal armor David had seen. This was aera metal, the special stuff Caera told him about. And the person on the horse was covered in it.

"The rider." Caera's voice was a whisper, but it trembled, and her eyes were wider than he'd ever seen them. David looked past her to Dao and Jes, and found the both of them shivering, Jes's eyes just as wide.

They were beyond terrified. They were frozen solid.



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