

1176

~~Mia~~

Zel outright moaned. "It says war?"

Maybe Mia should have lied. The further they got into the book and the more of Lucifer's words she read, the more the bushes in the cathedral burned, the louder and heavier the winds grew, and the brighter the runes became. She was scared.

"It... did, yeah. But, these are weird words to write in a book, right? This sounds more like a speech you'd give before going out for a fight, not something written in a book for knowledge or something."

"Indeed. But then, perhaps it is not written for knowledge, but something else, something more... intimate, than simply words written on a page."

"Intimate?"

Nodding, Zel turned the page. "Continue."

Mia sucked in a breath. The cathedral reacted to the words she read, meaning if Mia pretended to read something now, lied about it, Zel would know. No choice but to keep

reading.*(w)(w)w.n.r.v.e.l.w@r.m.co.M*

The next page was a doozy.

"The nine spires are my bastion. My children will flood the world. My children will pour over the Heavens, and then the Earth. The nine islands will bow to me. The surface will bow to me. All will be mine, and my children will feed well. Vengeance will be wrought, my kin will be ash, and the creator of all will watch in terror, powerless, as I make this Great Tower kneel." Jesus fucking christ, even if Zel wasn't overtly horribly evil, Lucifer seemed to be. The cathedral roared, and both Zel and Mia looked around as something rumbled in the wind, something suspiciously close to a deep, vibrating voice. The final line. "Rise, Belial. Rise."

Zel licked her lips in that slow, sensual way women did when they were thinking naughty thoughts. She turned the page.

"Uh..." Mia squinted at the new page, more tears in her eyes as the amber runes burned. "That's a weird page."

"I thought you might say so." Zel ran a finger down the pillar drawing in the center of the page. At the top were nine symbols, circles, and at the bottom were nine more. "You confirm my suspicions. It is the Great Tower. At its base, the nine spires of Hell. At its peak, the nine floating islands of Heaven." She tapped a claw on the small runes, written onto each of the eighteen circles, small things but legible. "Read."

"I..." Hmm. Mia leaned in closer, squinting against the brightness. A little David showed through now, curiosity that demanded she read, even though she knew she shouldn't. "I... I'm not sure." She half expected Zel to yell at her, but the demon queen sat there and waited, eyes sliding from Mia to the book, as Mia's hand drifted toward the page. "It's a... a... battle plan? These little runes on the side, little paragraphs, they're talking about details, about things that'll happen at False Gate. Lucifer and the nine Old Ones, they converged on False Gate, created the vortex, and then... there was a battle. The archangels, Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael, came down to Hell and fought. And..."

"Mmm?"

"Nothing. The plan describes the vortex worked, describes the battle started, and just... stops. I guess Lucifer never got to write anything else."

For the first time in a while, Zel frowned.*w@W.fr.0elworm.Co-m*

"A reasonable conclusion. What remains of our lord, no one truly knows. Perhaps they are trapped in the Forgotten Place. Perhaps they are dead, if such a being can even die." She laughed, and her frown disappeared. "Whatever the case may be, the bones of the old world are ours to do with as we see fit. Mine, to do with as I see fit. Within the remains of what came before, secrets lie hidden. And-"

Zel's voice disappeared under a humming choir in Mia's head. A voice. A song. Music that wasn't music. Something alien and cosmic pulled at her. With a mind of its own, Mia's hand descended onto the page of dark stone, and touched one of the runes. A specific rune in one of the circles that beckoned, demanded, she touch it.

Her head snapped back. Pain shot through her finger, up her arm, through her neck and into her skull. Her eyes closed, but light from somewhere burned through her eyelids into her brain. Emblems, symbols, strange shapes assaulted her thoughts, and somewhere beneath it all, she knew she was screaming.

The pain passed. She yanked her hand free, gasping and panting, and stared at Satan's book as the electric tingles continued up and down her arm. Zel hadn't helped her. The damn woman had let Mia scream like she'd stuck a fork in an electric socket and couldn't let go.

"Take your time," Zel said, grinning at her. "I am sure the book showed you something."

"It... It did! How'd you know it'd do that!?"

"The tales speak of the ways the ancient language could communicate with more than the symbols themselves. Traces of wisdom, resonating within the writings themselves, the literal runes. I thought perhaps whoever wrote this book had instilled such power into these pages." Zel plucked at her nipple chain as she ran claws over the stone pages. "What secrets did it place into your mind, young soul?"

"It... hit me with... more symbols. Dozens... more. Oh god." She clutched her skull and stared down at the book. Runes she couldn't solidify flowed through her mind, like a hazy dream stacked on a dream stacked on a dream, overriding and overflowing her thoughts.

Lightning erupted from the book, glowing arcs that snapped out. Mia, barely able to keep her eyes open as her brain scrambled, stepped and almost slipped down the stairs, but Zel caught her with one of her extra hands. Even as more yellow lightning shot out of the book and crashed over the black bones surrounding them, Zel didn't move. She held the book, made no effort to close it, and let what was happening happen, not afraid, but enraptured.

The lightning ignored Zel and Mia, and instead arced toward the walls, the ceiling, the floor, and the pillars. It danced over the black bones, drowned them in amber light, and crackled with hunger. It cut through the air and erupted, drawing lines that blinded and lasted in Mia's eyes after she closed them, like a long-exposure picture of headlights at night.

She opened her eyes. The symbols were still there, the symbols in Mia's mind. But now they also hovered in the air, drifted around the burning bushes, and more lightning struck out from the books directly onto them. Each amber lightning arc pushed the symbols, until they collided with a surface, either the pillars or the walls of the bone cathedral.

"Oh my," Zel said, licking her lips. The lightning eventually came to a stop, and Zel looked at Mia as she licked her lips. "What a wondrous sight."

With time, Mia's mind unscrambled. Feeling came back to her fingers, and the symbols glowing against the bone surfaces stopped scalding her brain. Slowly, she looked back down at the book, and pointed with a shaky hand at one of the circles at the base of the

tower.*wWw.r.OvE1wo(r)m.C6M*

"The first circle you touched," Zel said, "is the circle of Death's Grip."*www.n0(v)(e)0w00M.60m*

"It is? How do you know?"

"The symbol is written in various places, and my old lover Azailia has shown me the symbol of her spire." She tapped on a claw on the next symbol, clockwise. "The Grave Valley." She tapped on the circle in the opposite direction. "The Black Valley's symbol. I have seen it before, on my crusades."

Crusade was probably not an accurate word choice for the sort of shit Zel had been up to. Not vile enough.