

## 1177

Mia stepped off the stairs, checked to make sure Zel was okay with it, and drifted around the inside of the cathedral. Nine glowing runes, each as big as her entire body, circled the cathedral's floor, and she started with the one she knew as Death's Grip. Automatically, she went clockwise, to the Grave Valley symbol Zel had pointed out.

"The Grave Valley," Mia said. Zel nodded. Mia continued on the same path around the whole damn cathedral. "The Scar. The Red Pits. The Navameere Fields." Around around she went. "Um... The Unholy Lands. Next is Heaven's Tears."

Zel held up a claw. "I do not recognize those names"

"That's what it says. Next symbol is the Black Valley." She walked to the center of the huge room, and gestured down at the floor, where the ninth symbol sat. "And this one says... the Frozen Heart?"

Zel looked back down at the book still in her hands, smile borderline sinister.

"The Unholy Lands must be the original name for False Gate. Heaven's Tears became Angel's Spine, and the Frozen Heart became the Forgotten Place. How interesting. And the symbols above?"

Mia sucked in a slow breath as she looked up at the higher symbols now pinned to the bone walls. They weren't perfectly arranged or aligned, and they weren't directly over the symbols for the nine Hell spires either. It was almost like they'd been placed in free floating locations, like the islands Mia had seen on the stairs to Heaven.

"Avinoam. Ravid. Samael. Yathael. Tversia. Azaparad. Ayaloram. Sinev. Azoryev."

Zel moaned. "The names of the Heavenly Islands have been lost to us since the First Age." She grabbed a big bone on the floor, yanked it free, and took a moment to scratch some Estian runes on the black surface. Taking notes on some man's femur, what a world.

How much information was Mia feeding into Zel's inevitable war machine? Did she care? Demons killing demons didn't seem to have any ethical dilemmas she could think of, but if she said something that let Zel do something crazy, like attack Earth, or Heaven, she'd never forgive herself.

Last week she'd been spying on boys as a ghost in university while waiting for someone to do an autopsy on her corpse. Now she was actively trying to figure out if her words would trigger Armageddon. What the fuck.

Mia moved to the other symbols, these circling the cathedral pillars. So many, hundreds, thousands, of varying sizes.

"I... don't know if I can translate these," she said, wincing.

But Zel didn't raise her voice. She spoke calmly, with a hint of ice that scared Mia just as much.

"And why not?"

"I'm not sure. Some of them look like names, but it's like... like..." Mia touched one of the big runes, half expecting it to zap her, either with mystical knowledge or some pain. It did neither, and she tapped a finger on the warm surface glowing on the charred bones of hundreds of dead people. "It's almost like it's asking me to pronounce it with two tongues at the same time? Or two throats?"

Zel nodded, and gestured for Mia to continue. Say one thing for the demon queen, she had a head on her shoulders, and wasn't the sort to kill or torture Mia just because she didn't like what Mia had to say or was capable of *www.novE1worm.c0m*

Another rune waited to be read, and this one she managed. Potram. Another, royam. Another, batlam. Each her mind tried to digest, but it was like the other words, alien, and almost impossible to pronounce. But somehow, these stuck, as if demanding she figure out how to pronounce them completely.

She tried. "Batlam." The word was electricity on her tongue, and images shot through her brain with blinding light. A sword. A spear. A shield. A bow, with a quiver and arrows. The blades and tips all held a gentle gold glow, and the material was perfectly reflective, like a pristine mirror held by wondrous gold. Armor followed, gold and silver, with flowing white silk between the joints. *www.nOV8Lworm.c0M*

Mia looked down at her hand. The rune, of its own power, threw an image in her mind of her hand covered in the most beautiful silver and gold armor, with flowing engravings that reminded her of the gates of Heaven. No, they reminded her of the armor she'd seen on the angels at the gates of Heaven. It was their armor. Angel armor. Angel weapons.

She moved on to the next rune.

"Potram." The same sensation, but different images. Naked skin. Roman sandals. Jewelry, bracelets and necklaces, rings and belly chains, nipple piercings and wreath tiaras, gold and silver. Sheer white silk flowing over skin.

"Royam." This one confused her. It was like the potram rune, but the clothes seemed far more official, lots of white silk, less jewelry, bits of armor, and less exposed skin. Assuming these runes had something to do with what angels wore, this rune was business clothes, and the potram rune was for casual Friday. *W4v(w).n.vE/W ©Rm.coM*

Why, or how, did the runes summon images of armor clothing into her mind? It was almost like pronouncing the runes required more than just her tongue, but her mind too, memories, thoughts, and something beyond.

Other runes asked her to pronounce them, but it was useless. Life and death, fire and water, up and down, the great tower, all half pronunciations that left out something key she had no chance of wrapping her mind or tongue around. They grew borderline cosmic and insane the more she found. The runes for existence and non-existence cut across her eyes like razors, and she looked away. Others weren't so bad, but even harder to grasp, like trying to grab clouds. Runes for dreams, emotions, and... soul?

"... don't tell me."

Zel grinned at her. "Do not tell you what?"

"There's some sort of secret message written in the runes, and I have to go around Hell, touch each book, and absorb the message from each spire in order to decipher it?"

Zel laughed and laughed, and slowly closed the book. The burning bushes calmed to quiet flickers. The howling, roaring wind disappeared. The cathedral of the dead became a deadly silent place once again.

*Ww.N@VE/Worm.©(o)m*