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"I doubt it. For what purpose? Some absurd journey or adventure, left behind by our great lord as a pilgrimage for future demons? No. I suspect what now rests in your mind is a glimpse of the power Lucifer used to turn Death's Grip into what it is. Perhaps power our lord used to create its spire, or perhaps, to create Belial?"

"Power? They're just runes, right? Just symbols-" Mia grabbed her head as she stumbled, but Zel snapped out a hand and caught her. "Got a little lightheaded there."

"Runes can be more than simply knowledge. In the Spires War, angels intervened, and I heard talk of the rune they used to empower themselves. Batlam, as you said." Zel nodded. Mia gulped. "Now come. You are useless to me if damaged. There are other things to read, but they can wait."

Batlam. The symbol jumped into Mia's mind again, pulled up out of the muck of memory and the strange book's haze that still infected her mind. She could envision it completely, sharp and clear in her thoughts, and it tingled, even as she failed to pronounce it.

Nodding, Zel got up, put the book back on the hilariously huge pulpit, and gestured toward the cathedral door.

"As much as I would love to think Lucifer left great power hidden inside these ancient relics for Hell's children to use, it is a ridiculous notion, something pulled of moronic fantasy stories. No, Lucifer and the Old Ones used every tool they had in their war against Heaven and the other archangels. Only the echoes of the battle remain." Zel set a hand on Mia's shoulder, and her three others pushed open the cathedral door. "But, knowledge is a power of its own. Something has happened, something that has led to your arrival, and perhaps the arrival of others. Knowledge will be how I mold these events to my benefit." Nodding, she guided Mia to the tunnel door, opened it, and Kas and Adron turned around immediately with small bows. "This is but one shadow of the old world, little soul. My spire holds others, and you will read their contents to me. But no more today. Go, rest. Tomorrow, we will try something different."

Different. Mia looked up at the bolstara tetrad, and risked an accusing squint, which filled Zel with all sorts of playful giggles. Oh boy.

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~~David~~

None of the other demons got away. They didn't even try. With a screech and roar, they threw themselves at the rider, and the rider cut them down like cattle. Like chopping blocks of wood. The rider was fast, and direct. No elegance to the movements, no finesse, he moved with the same extreme bluntness as the demons, just faster and harder.

He chopped the demons apart, hitting a massive brute in the skull hard enough his axe went through their head, down through their chest, and out through their crotch. The axe hit the stone, and a splash of fire erupted outward, flowing over the rider and harmlessly off his full plate bronze armor. The other brute he cut in half horizontally.

And then he was alone. No more demons, just a pile of burning flesh.

David somehow managed to tear his eyes away and look to his three demon protectors, but all three stared out over the distance to the rider, and all three trembled. The rider was far away, and the four of them were well hidden, flat against their rock, a good hundred feet up with only the tips of their heads - and horns - sticking out over the little cliff edge. The sky was getting darker. The four of them were completely silent. There was no chance the rider could see them, or even hear them when they whispered. www.NoVeIWoRm.coM

But they didn't say a word, just stared, as the goliath of a man hooked his blood-soaked axes on his back, got down on a knee, plunged his gauntlet into one of the dead demon's chest, and ripped out the heart. Seamless. Even Caera struggled to harvest a heart, breaking bones and ripping a heart free of binding muscle wasn't exactly easy. But the rider had zero trouble, and fed the heart to his giant goort mount. Oh god the horse had sharp teeth. That was fucking weird.

David looked Caera's way again, but before he could say anything she nodded back toward the rider.

"He might remove his helmet to eat," she whispered. "We have to see that." www.NoVeIWoRm.coM

Caera didn't sound like she was watching some powerful demon she feared. She sounded like she was in total awe of a god, or a mystical figure from history. Even Dao and Jes were awestruck and hypnotized. www.NoVeIWoRm.coM

The rider did gather another heart, this one from the giant korgejin. Such a titan of a demon, something from nightmares, a classic example of a terrifying brutal juggernaut complete with the wings, hooves, and horns. And the rider had brought him down in moments, without saying a word, without even a grunt.

He used an axe, and chopped down into the tetrad demon's chest. The breastplate managed to resist the blow, barely, and the clang echoed like a mini explosion as the black metal bent. It wouldn't have taken all that much effort to slide it aside, or cut the straps holding the asymmetrical slab of bent metal to the demon's chest, but the rider didn't bother. He chopped again, and his axe erupted with red sparks that showered the area in embers and dancing flames.

The armor broke apart, and fell to the sides of the demon's enormous chest. Big as the rider was, the demon had to be ten feet tall, and cutting into his chest made a mess of splashing blood that soaked the area. But again, the rider ripped the giant heart free of the titan without issue, held it in his hand, and stared at it from behind his skull-like great helm.

Caera pushed David flat to the stone, just as the rider turned, and faced them. Oh fuck.

"We go," Caera whispered, even quieter than before, "now."

"Now? He's looking in our direction."

"Exactly. He spotted us. Let's go before he thinks we're a threat." She sounded terrified. She looked terrified. www.NoVeIWoRm.coM

Slowly, David nodded. He turned his head back toward the rider, but they were too low to the stone to see over the lip, and that was the only reason they were able to slip away.

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"What the fuck was that?" David asked, thirty minutes later with plenty of rock and stone between them and the slaughter. Even with all the space they put between them and the rider, he kept his voice low.

Caera didn't answer though, and trembles still worked up and down her tail and spine. She walked on all fours, low to the ground, and she gestured to David to stay low. She didn't have to do so for Jes and Dao, both ladies crouching with every step, Jes sometimes going on all fours too. They had to drift around the mountain, deeper into its ravines, and in the opposite direction of the cave they'd been sleeping in, before Caera spoke.