

1209

"I... didn't expect the hunt to go that way," Mia said. "I thought, I mean... I guess I didn't think."

Up on the raised side of her bedroom, with the big table and chairs, she sat on the huge table, legs dangling, uneaten heart sitting beside her. Adron sat in one of the bone chairs. Hannah stood by the closed window, and peeked through its teeth out at the fire sky. Kas sat in his usual semi-crouched position, this time on the ramp near the table. Even without eyes, it was easy to see he was angry about something.

The uneasy silence returned. She hated those. Time to fix it.

"I should have stayed here," she said. "I... kinda expected you to resist when I said I wanted to come, Kas. You could have told me to stay. You could have gone on one of your usual hunts, instead of... whatever that was."

She braced for a roar or angry comment from her bodyguard, but none came. The eyeless dinosaur did not move, did not respond, only crouched nearby, and licked a single fang to wipe some of the blood away. It'd be a while before Hell herself absorbed it, leaving everyone with bloody hands and limbs for a few hours or more, but considering Mia had literally walked through entrails on her first day in Hell, a little blood barely registered.

"Kas is one of Zel's enforcers," Adron said. "She has others, but Kas has been doing this for a while, and he's good at it. There's a lot of demons he knows are good for killing, and make for a source of food when needed."

"Good for killing?" Mia asked.

"Yeah. Darrilius and his friends are just a few of the dozens of demons in the spire alone who are trying to weasel their way up the ladder."

"Really? You don't go... I don't know, arrest them or something?"

Adron laughed. "The only people who get arrested are people Zel plans to torture so she can learn something. And right now there's no one she's concerned about. The bailiffs are doing their thing. No one here in tower is a threat to her."

"But you just said--"

"Not a threat, and useful. Keep your enemies close, and all that. And it helps the demons in the tower hone our skills." Adron gestured toward Kas. "Be it physical skill and strength." He gestured to himself. "Or a good eye, ear, and a smart mouth."

"Smart mouth," Hannah said, nodding casually without looking away from the window.

Nodding, Mia looked back down the ramp of the raised area, down to Kas again. With the way his head was aimed, he was probably staring off at nothing, and maybe thinking about stuff. He had acted a little odd, after the fight, more closed off than usual, and for someone as naturally closed-off as Kas, that was pretty much becoming a statue. And in typical stoic man fashion, he wasn't going to tell them what was bothering him.

"Mia, eat," Hannah said.

"Oh, right." Mia picked the heart up, and spent far too long holding it in her palm. Far as she could tell, it looked like a heart, fleshy and firm and still wet, and a bit bigger than a human's. It smelled like blood, uncooked meat, and... something else. "Do I have to?"

"Zel will have our heads if you don't," Adron said. "Besides, Kas risked his life for you. You wouldn't want that to have gone to waste, right?"

Oh that bastard. Adron gave her one of his playful grins, and she returned it with her best frown, but it was useless. The demon was impervious to her glare, and gestured at the heart in her hands. It felt all too similar to the fruit Caera had give her a week ago. Or rather, the fruit had felt all too similar to the chunk of bloody flesh now in her hand.

A week. All of this had happened in a week. Was David even still alive, or at least as alive as someone could be in the afterlife? Did he have the same strange abilities she did?

Sighing, she closed her eyes, and took a bite. The disgust of biting into a raw heart, a demon heart at that, lasted only a few seconds before the same delicious taste and tingling warmth of the forbidden fruit hit her. It tasted good. Why did it have to taste good? Groaning, she chewed the heart, and it broke under her teeth like a nice piece of meat cooked in a slow cooker all day. It was too damn good.

She swallowed it down, and white and red flashed in her eyes. She froze, sucked in a hard breath, and grabbed the table edge with her free hand. More lights cut through her eyes. The table underneath her disappeared. The heart in her hand, the people in her room, the room itself, it all vanished.

Violence. Teeth. Sharp teeth, biting flesh. Hands, ripping and tearing. Horns, skewering.

Sex. An enormous cock, plunging into women, some human, some demon. Screaming, mewls, whimpers, pleasure or terror, Mia couldn't tell. Chaos.

Names. Fulvio, and friends Darrilius and Emalei. More violence. Mia's eyes, Fulvio's eyes, staring out as her--as his big hands reached out and killed. And killed. And killed.

And then it was gone. Her room came back, along with the people in it. Adron and Hannah both stared at her, Kas had his head pointed at her, and all of them held their breath as they watched and waited.

"Uh..." Mia stared down at the heart. It was a big thing, with plenty of bites left, and now it felt a thousand times heavier. "I... I uh..." Slowly, she looked to the others, waiting for the 'yeah yeah that happens every time' speech. But they didn't say a thing. "Why's everyone staring at me?"

"That was a pretty weird reaction," Hannah said. "Your eyes went wide and you froze. You okay?"

"Yeah, I think so. But holy shit, those images were visceral. Thought I really was Fulvio for a second there."

Hannah blinked, looked to Adron, who also blinked, and they both looked to Kas, who might as well have blinked with the way he tilted his head.

"Images?" Adron asked.

"Yeah. Yeah you... you... don't see images when you eat a heart, do you?"

"No. No one does." He leaned in closer. "Do tell."

Oh no, not another thing on her list of quirks. She looked back down at the heart, half expecting it to explode in her palm, or ooze new blood, or maybe start talking. But, nope, it was just a hunk of meat that had sent weird images through her brain.

"I saw... I saw things, through someone else's eyes. Fulvio's, I think..." She put the heart down, and picked it back up. Put it down. Picked it back up, and put it down. David would have probably taken another bite, determined to understand and figure out what happened. She was fucking terrified.

Kas clicked once, and sauntered up the ramp to stand closer to her.

"Unusual," he said.

"Very," Adron said. "No one sees things when they eat hearts, Mia. Demons absorb the resonance. Humans absorb the essence. That's it." Adron took her hand, scooped the heart up like it hadn't just assaulted her with visions of violence and sex, and set it in her palm. "You seem fine, though. Keep eating, see what happens?"

"Keep eating..." Easier said than done. "You know if something bad happens to me, like, if I die or something, I'm going to blame you, right? And Zel will put you out on one of those spikes outside?"

That did give Adron pause, for a whole two seconds, before he shrugged.

"No risk no reward."

After a very exaggerated eye roll, she lifted the heart up to her mouth, and bit into it again. She swallowed the meat down, and sure enough, more images flooded her. Fangs. Claws. Talons. Bones breaking. Skin tearing. Rape.

And then it was gone. Like watching a scary movie, the images hit her, poured over her eyes from the inside, and then fled. She took another bite. The images grew brighter, there were more of them, and they zipped through her mind with speed and power. For just a fraction of a second, she knew what it was like to rip open someone's chest. For a whole half a second, she knew what it felt like to have a giant dick, and use it to stretch open what looked like a gremla's comparatively very tiny slit. For a whole second, she knew--

Blackness pulled her down.

~~~~~

Her eyes snapped open. She sat up with a jolt, flung herself to the side, and her forehead nearly collided with Hannah's.

"Oh thank fucking god," Hannah said, hand to her chest. "Fucking christ you scared the shit out of me. Twice."

"What happened?" Mia tried to push herself off the table she was sitting on, except, she wasn't on the table anymore. Stumbling while sitting was a first, and the only reason she didn't crack her lip falling over was her pile of blankets she was apparently sitting on.

Adron and Kas stood over her. The shark demon took a slow, deep breath, and lowered himself into his usual crouch, while Adron sighed relief as he squatted down in front of her.

"You fainted," Adron said. "About ten minutes ago. We were about ready to go get Zel." He tapped his horn with a claw. "You had me worried you were right, and Zel was going to rip me a new one."

"I fainted? I..." She licked her lips. The taste of the heart was still there, but no more visions hit her. The memories were still there, though, someone else's memories, separate from her own but accessible. "I guess the strange images I was seeing... overloaded my brain?"

"Mia," Hannah said, "we're in the afterlife. I don't think neurology is going to explain shit."

"Well I don't know! All I know is, I ate most of that demon heart, I'm no longer hungry, and each time I gulped a bit down I saw visions of things the demon had done."

"I took a bite," Hannah said, shrugging. "I didn't see any visions."

"Visions of things Fulvio had done? What kind of things?" Adron asked.

"What kind? I... I guess anything that was... intense? I saw a lot of sex, and a lot of violence."

Hannah leaned back in. "Saw it?"

"Saw it. Felt it. It's... weird. It's like someone recorded memories in my skull, but... put them in a book and set them aside. Like, I can remember what I saw, but they don't feel like my memories."

"Something to tell Zel, then," Adron said. "She wants to know everything she can about you."

"I guess, yeah." Another thing for Zel, another thing to haunt Mia. She wasn't human. That was terrifying.

She held up her hand in front of her, the one that'd held the big demon heart, and she squeezed it experimentally. Those were some disturbing memories, and thank god whatever made her special could also put the memories in a box off to the side in her mind. And she did it without thinking about it, like a reflex, like something she just knew how to do as easy as flexing her fingers. Just like how she knew how to read the ancient language.

She felt good, too. Not hungry anymore, feeling alive, feeling... powerful.

"I can feel that," Adron said, and he grinned as his tail came around and poked her in the sternum. "Your aura, I mean. Just a little tingle, but it feels... I don't know. Feels good."

"It does," Mia said, and she squeezed her hand into a fist. She felt really good.