

1222

--Mia--

"I don't want to help her."

Sighing, Adron shook his head and gestured to her.

"You sure?"

She sat on her pile of blankets, while Adron stood by her closed teeth door, Kas beside him crouched in his corner. Hannah was nowhere to be found, kept safe in Adron's guest room. Zel liked him, so he got to have a guest room. Hopefully that didn't mean he liked her back enough to betray Mia and tell her what Mia was telling him right now. Not that Zel would care all that much if she found out Mia didn't want to help her. But, maybe she would. Mia was now on thin ice.

Kas clicked once, but said nothing. Far as she could tell from his body language, he wasn't happy about the situation, but that could have meant anything. For all Mia knew, Kas actually really liked Zel, and would do anything to make her happy. Acelina did.

"I'm... I don't know." Mia hugged her knees to her chest. "The way she threatened me, I..." She put her forehead to her knees. The way Zel had threatened her had been terrifying, and Mia had read enough about this sort of thing to recognize the cold, harsh shift of context. She'd known Zel was a ruthless tyrant, but she hadn't really been able to appreciate it. Seeing what Zel did to Vinicius the second time, literally stabbing him, and then looking at Mia with obvious 'I could do this to you, too' eyes had been an ice bath for her brain.

Now, she couldn't stop picturing herself chained to the wall, being tortured, skewered, screaming in pain, and...

Kas rumbled a little, moved slightly in her direction, stopped, and resumed his crouched position.*www.NoVeLwOrM.com*

Adron, on the other hand, came over and squatted in front of her.

"This shit really hits you hard, doesn't it?"

"What?"

"The... bad stuff." He gestured around vaguely. "Torture, death, things like that."*www.NoVeLwOrM.com*

"Of course it hits me hard! I..." She eyed the demon, his two big black horns, his demony face, before she sighed and planted her forehead on her knees again. "It's not like that with other souls, is it?"

"Nope."*www.NoVeLwOrM.com*

And she knew why, too. He was about to say it, too, but didn't. He didn't need to.

Was Hannah like that? Just emotionally dumb or blind to other people's pain? Didn't put herself in other people's shoes? Mia couldn't stop putting herself in other people's shoes. If someone else hurt, then she hurt. It was part of why she got into psychology.

Christ, what she'd do to be back in class, reading about simple little studies about why girls with absent fathers become strippers, why boys with pampering mothers have screwed up perceptions of romance, and why kids who grow up alone have attachment issues. And then of course reading about counter examples. She loved reading about that stuff, trying to figure out where it made sense, where it didn't, and then having her perceptions flipped upside down by the professor. She loved trying to figure out why she was the way she was, did the things she did, felt the things she felt. Growing up an orphan, bouncing from guardian to guardian, of course she wanted to figure out more about herself.

So much for all that. Now she was in Hell, surrounded by fellow souls who belonged there unlike her, and demons who lived on violence and sex, and literally ate human hearts. Her soft heart was going to get her killed. Like maybe David had been. Much as her brother could be pretty robotic on the outside, she knew he was just as sensitive as she was on the inside. Maybe...

Sighing, she shook her head. "I don't want to help her control Vinicius."

"I told you about him, Mia," Adron said. "He was a raging monster. Think Kas." With one of his playful grins, the vratorin gestured back to the sarkarin. "Except enormous, and constantly bloodthirsty, slaughtering and killing everything he can get his hands on. You're really worried about his feelings?"

"It's more than that. Zel's... I can't... I don't know if I can do what she wants. She wants me to be this tool of control, I can't do that without getting into the mindset for it, and I can't do that! I try, and... I just..." The sounds of Vinicius screaming in pain, the sight of a titan panting and groaning with exhaustion and misery, she couldn't wipe them from her mind. The memory was like someone pulling a blanket out from underneath her. Tapping into the aura Zel wanted her to craft was not easy.

After a few seconds of silence, Kas took a couple steps closer.

"Zel won't kill you without reason," he said.

"I know. I'm less worried about dying than I am being tortured. And..." And of Vinicius getting tortured.

Adron and Kas traded glances. After another short, eternal silence, Adron reached down, took her hand, and helped her up to her feet.

"Zel is a crafty bitch, Mia. She's not some movie villain. If you're struggling to do what she wants, and torturing you won't help, she won't do it. Just talk with her, work with her, and everything will work out."

It was a struggle to not roll her eyes at Adron and his casual use of words like 'movie'. Adron was right, but having things 'work out' was the exact thing Mia wanted to avoid. Working out meant Mia, on a literal leash at Zel's side like a pet, working with her and her spire tools to break demons. Even if the demons deserved it, or worse, Mia did not want to be the person doling out that punishment. She couldn't be.

And a little voice in her head was convinced Zel would love to takeover every spire, attack Heaven, and turn the whole world into her own personal buffet. Mia didn't want to be a part of that, either. But, it was mostly the doing the bad stuff herself and seeing it all first-hand that terrified her. The scene in The Green Mile, that last scene with Tom Hanks and Michael Duncan, she still had nightmares about it sometimes, except it was her wearing the officer's uniform.

"You really believe in Zel, don't you?" she asked, eyes drifting down.

"Believe?"*www.NoVeLwOrM.com*

"Believe. Like, she's your leader, and you'll do what she wants because you believe in her cause?"

Adron raised a black brow. Much as he tried to hide it, she saw the hesitation plain as day.

"Believe is a strong word, but Zel's power and wit can't be ignored. She took this tower in the chaos after the Spires War. She stopped Vinicius. She fought against Alessio. She..." He shrugged. Much as he wanted to sound convincing, the conviction drained from his tone. "She's the ruler of Death's Grip for a reason."

Mia squinted back up at him. "It doesn't sound like you believe in her, just that you fear her."

After a long, heavy sigh, Adron nodded. "Yeap, that's pretty much what it is."

Kas came a little closer, clucked once deep in his throat, and shook his head as he gestured to Adron and Mia with his big tail.

"Fear and respect. What else would a demon want?"

"Oh I don't know, trust!?" She threw up her hands, marched up to Kas, and pointed straight at his snout. "I'd like to trust the person I'm serving? Trust that they'll do the right thing? Trust that they won't betray me? Trust..."

Even without eyes, she could see Kas's facial expression well enough, subtle shifts in his shark dragon snout. He didn't understand why she'd need that, even after their talk.

She clenched her hands into fists and forced down the urge to punch his big scary sharp jaw.

"I don't want to help her."