

## 1223

"You don't have much of a choice," Adron said. He stepped past her and stopped at her door. It was closed, and he wasn't going anywhere unless she opened it for him. "I'll try and play damage control with Zel, but I'm not gonna lie, Mia. I'm siding with Zel. I always side with Zel, because she's the big bad and she's earned the right to be the big bad. You can even find statues of her, ones Hell grew, because Hell recognizes Zel's power and influence. And, much as I know you hate this idea, Zel isn't all that bad compared to a lot of the other spire rulers."

Mia shivered and hugged herself.

"And Alessio?"

Alessio, another tetrad like Zel, was the ruler of the province counter-clockwise from Death's Grip, some place called the Black Valley. Clockwise was the Grave Valley, run by Azailia, another tetrad. Part of Mia wanted to feel kind of proud that the province she was in and its sisters were run by women -- or at least women-like demons -- but not if they were all evil bitches like Zel.

Adron looked Kas's way. Kas did nothing for a couple moments before shrugging and rubbing a claw on one of his horns, like an angry man picking his fingernails with a big knife.

"She's different," Kas said.

"Different. Well thanks for the detailed explanation!"

Adron shook his head as he squatted down in front of her.

"Mia, what we're trying to say is--"

"This is Hell and Zel is a better option than the others?"  
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Again the two boys looked between each other and back to her.

Kas spoke first. "He--"

"The fact there's worse options doesn't mean this option is a good option! That's not how that works!" David's words came flying out of her mouth before she could stop them. "That's not logical! You don't just take all the options and draw a line in the middle and call that a reasonable compromise! You use other things, other points as your reference, and... and..." Okay, she wasn't David, and the exact details of the logic fallacies escaped her. But she could still understand it! "I'm not going to just accept this situation because it's better than the alternative. I won't accept it! I'm..."  
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Another heavy silence fell on them. It was cliché at this point, heavy silences, the inescapable reality that she was in Hell. She wanted to fix her situation, fix the problems, save herself, save her brother, even save the remnants. But she couldn't. Adron and Kas knew she wanted to, and they knew she couldn't. So no one said a thing.

It wasn't long before Zel showed up.

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"We will try again," Zel said, voice solid and cold.

"I'm..."

Zel, standing beside the bound Vinicius, gestured to the beast with one of her metal rods.  
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"You crafted the aura yesterday, weak as it was. With practice you will craft stronger."

Mia wasn't entirely sure of that. She'd learned how to suppress the aura a bit, and craft some nuanced ones, but Zel wanted power. The only way to make her new boss... master happy, was to push out an overpowering aura of control that would make Vinicius succumb to the spire tools Zel had brought. Mia just wasn't that sort of person, and she knew it.

Supposedly, if Zel could get the tools to work, she wouldn't need Mia putting out the aura. The spire could summon a horde, make all demons in the area come to the spire and pick a target to kill, where Zel could then use the tools to brand the demons and seal the spire's command deep into them. That would force them to give into the horde, like a riot group getting taken up in the chaos and going on a mindless rampage, all guided toward her goal. It was less waging war, and more summoning the swarm to destroy and devour.

Mia was tempted to ask if Zel had actually ever broken a demon to serve her on a demon-to-demon level. The horde was one thing. Mind breaking a single demon into a servant was another thing entirely.

She gave into the temptation.

"Will that tool really allow you to break him completely? 'Cause, I mean, on the surface you could break a wild horse, or a violent dog, and zoos used to... still do, break animals to be a part their act. But that's all psychology stuff, and sometimes animals snap and kill their owners." Deservedly so in some of those cases.

With an almost motherly sigh, Zel nodded as she stood in front of Vinicius and placed her back against his chest. She had a couple spikes back there, not big ones like the bound monster, but enough Vinicius probably had to be careful with how he breathed. The hole in his gut was mostly healed over, but the flesh looked soft, red, and easy to tear. It wouldn't be long before Zel ripped it open, knowing her.

"There in lies the joy of the leash." Zel gestured to the small chain on the other wall, and its glowing amber stone similar to Mia's necklace. "I crafted it using the spire, with what knowledge I had of Valzanal's methods. The spire can create auras, more complex than a demon's sin aura but not nearly complex enough to accomplish a nuanced goal. Valzanal wanted to overcome that issue, and so do I."

Oh sweet Jesus Zel wanted to brainwash the world, Hell, Heaven, all of it probably, and enslave it. Adron said she wasn't a movie villain, but the tone in her voice said otherwise. Maybe Mia's second bodyguard didn't know his master as well as he thought.

"That's..."  
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