

## 1231

He met her gaze, and his red demon eyes held hers. No response. Those chains were massive, and even with enough strength to break one of his spikes off -- which felt like steel in her hand -- he hadn't been strong enough to break a chain.

"I guess killing her doesn't somehow automatically undo your chains."

He grunted and nodded.

"Is it possible for me to free you? Can I get these chains off?"

The beast managed a small smile, a subtle thing only the inner corners of his dragony demon snout could manage. He nodded.

She stepped around one of his legs and looked up. The chains were locked firmly in place, but that didn't make any sense. Zel had locked him up, which meant there had to have been a point where the chains were workable. Maybe they--oh, there was a chain behind the beast, pulling at the other chains, locking them tight around wall hooks to keep his limbs spread. The center chain was bound to its own hooks along the wall, and went up and down the wall so each chain that bound the creature's limbs had a different place it could bind to the center chain.

Intricate. But, at the bottom, there was some sort of lock mechanism, a big block thing that held the chain tight to the wall hooks. If she undid that, he'd... still be locked up, because he could only move forward away from the wall and that'd just pull on the chains on the hooks. She'd have to unhook the chains herself, while standing underneath his legs and behind him. Scary.

"Okay! Okay. plan. I need a plan." She pulled on her hair as she stepped back and paced in circles. "Plan. Plan. Plan. I need to... to... make a decision." Brilliant plan. "Okay! I... I..." Slowly, her eyes went back to the leash. "Demons make deals, right?" Stupid plan. Her only plan.

Vinicius tilted his head.

"Demons, they make deals? It's a big thing in storytelling on the surface, that demons make contracts, deals with humans. The demon has to obey the word of the contract, but not the spirit of it, and will either honor the contract that's ultimately to the person's detriment, or try and find a way to violate the contract without breaking it so they can fuck the human over." Full rant mode. She was stalling. "I... I guess that doesn't apply here. But, either way, I have a deal to offer!" She gestured to the leash. "I'm going to get the leash, because, I mean, you're a demon and I can't trust you any further than I can throw you. And then I'm going to find a way to free you. Then you're going to help me. Okay? You help me, and--"

The metal door swung open, and the ancient reflex of a child to hide something they're not supposed to have at the sound of an approaching adult kicked in. She put her hands behind her back, spike pointed up.

Zel stood there, alone, and her usually calm, even playful, occasionally angry face held something Mia had never expected to see on her. Panic. Or maybe, frustration crossed with panic? She was rushing, in a hurry, and she set her eyes on Mia.

"Come with me."

"W-What? I--"

"Come with me! The rider is here, and has launched some absurd suicidal assault on the spire."

"The rider? I--"

"The blasted rider shows himself now, of all times! He's come for you, clearly. I will not risk your life to him, whether he is here to kill you or steal you away. Now come with me!" She reached down, grabbed Mia's shoulder, and pulled her toward the door. Her three metal rods were nowhere to be found, thank god.

Mia risked a quick glance back up at Vinicius, before she stepped forward with [Zel.WwW.n@elworm.com](mailto:Zel.WwW.n@elworm.com)

"The rider is here for me? I don't... but I..." She stopped moving.

Mistake. Zel squatted down in front of her, grabbed her by the shoulders with two hands, and grabbed her by the neck with two others. Just one of the ten-foot-tall demon woman's hands was big enough to completely circle her throat, let alone two. Her red eyes on her smooth, beautiful, alien mask-like face glared at Mia with enough fury to incinerate her. The amber horn in the middle of her black horns glowed, and heat poured out of it over Mia's face hot enough to almost burn.

"You are mine. Your life is mine. If you so much as open your mouth again without my permission, I will rip out your tongue, and that will be but the first thing on my list of tortures I will force upon you every night." She pulled Mia in closer, until the demon's subtle nose almost touched hers. Whatever patience Zel had to be nice with Mia was gone, evaporated, by the rider's attack. "Understand me, slave? I am done playing games with you. The rider is here for you, proving how essential you are. I will no longer entertain this ridiculous dance of playful threats. You are mine! My too! You will obey me, or so help me Liith herself will--"

Mia sank the spike into Zel's left eye, as hard as she could. It sank through flesh far more easily than it should have.

Time froze. Zel stared at Mia. Mia stared at Zel in her one remaining eye. No one said a thing, total silence that stretched on and on until eternity seemed but a moment in the endless nothing. The spike went deep. It'd been sharper than Mia had thought, and Mia had put as much strength into the swing as she could. Years of exercising meant she had a bit of strength to work with, more than anyone thought a tiny ginger girl like her had, but that couldn't explain how easily the spike had parted flesh, and sunk deep into Zel's brain.

Zel should have dodged. She could have dodged, if she hadn't been lost in her rage, and utterly convinced of her superiority. The mix of searing fury and freezing cruelty coming out of the demon queen brought Mia's heart to a standstill, and only once the next heart beat kicked in did the eternity end.

"How... dare... y..." Zel's one eye held Mia's until it rolled upward. The demon queen's grip on her throat loosened, and eventually the grip on her shoulders, too. Almost as if trying to resist what just happened, to deny the reality, Zel refused to simply fall over. Her squat turned into a kneel, and for another moment, her single eye managed to refocus on Mia, and one of her hands reached out for her. Mia stepped back.

The bolstara tetrad fell on her side, and went still.

"Oh god. Oh god oh god oh god. What have I done?" Mia, eyes locked on the corpse of the demon queen and the big spike sticking out of her eye, knelt down in front of her. With a shaky, hesitant hand, she shook the giant woman's shoulder. No response. She pushed her over enough -- fucking christ she was heavy -- to see her chest, and watched. No breathing. Dead.

The amber horn on the queen's head glowed, flickered, and died.

"Oh fucking god. She's dead. She's dead and... and... I have no escape plan!" She'd seen enough documentaries and read enough about murderers to know the great flaw killers had was their obsession in planning a kill, and seeming inability to plan what to do after. Those people went to jail. She was going to get eaten alive, literally. "Shit shit shit! I have to..."

The door was open, and the door beyond it. Zel had come in in a rush, forgetting to close the second door. She always kept at least one of the two door closed between Vinicius and the dungeon.

Mia could run away, right now. No one knew Zel was dead, and other demons were used to seeing her around. Normally Kas would be with her.

Kas. He was probably waiting outside the dungeon. Maybe she could run to him, and ask for his help?[WwW.NovèLWor.M.com](mailto:WwW.NovèLWor.M.com)

No! No. She liked Kas, and she was sure there was a decent guy in there, but that didn't mean she could trust him. Kas had said that himself, you can't trust demons.

She looked back to the leash dangling on the wall, and then to Vinicius. He had a small smile on again, and it looked a little more evil than she wanted.

"Okay. Okay. Okay okay plan plan. I need... keys! To find the keys! Do you know where the keys are? To your chains?"

Vinicius shook his head.

"Fuck fuck fuck! But, it does take keys, right? Keys would work?"

He nodded.

She ran out to the dungeon.

Corpses, everywhere. Skeletons, everywhere. All Zel's torture victims. Demons and souls, still alive, strapped down to bone chairs covered in spikes. Demons and souls missing limbs, sitting in cells of metal bars, with more spikes. She ignored them and their groans and screams as best she could.

"Keys, keys, keys." She forced her eyes up and around, and scampered around between bodies, blood, writhing screaming souls, and demons that glared at her with confusion and rage. Their cells had big metal padlocks, smaller than the one holding Vinicius's chains, but still, something that took a key. "Okay, someone here, tell me where the keys are! If you tell me where the keys are, I'll let everyone out!" Much as the idea of freeing these demons and souls sickened her, there was a good chance Zel locked them up more for disobeying her orders, rather than being so evil they had to be imprisoned. And besides, she'd free them only after Vinicius was free, and he'd protect her.

She'd make him protect her.[WwW.n@elworm.com](mailto:WwW.n@elworm.com)

One of the demons in a nearby cell, one of the few who wasn't dead, managed to cough up a choked sound.

"Zel--"

"Zel's dead!" Mia gestured back to the room. "You saw her go in, and you don't hear her anymore! Where are the keys!?"

The demons looked between each other, before the vrat in the cell spoke up again. Poor guy was pinned to the wall, but not by chains. He had spikes through his wrists and ankles, crucifying him to the metal wall.

"In her... throne room."

Mia's heart sank into her stomach, and her shoulders fell with it. On the first day she'd arrived at the spire, getting to the throne room from the ground floor had burned her legs off. This trip would be twice as long, past demons, past maybe Kas or Adron or Diogo, or [WwW.NovèLWor.M.com](mailto:WwW.NovèLWor.M.com)

She stood up straight, sucked in a breath, tightened her hands into fists, and ran for the dungeon exit.