

1240

Adron and Hannah both stepped ahead of Mia and through the hallway back into the main area of the dungeon first. Vinicius followed. Acelina did not. Sobbing filled Vinicius's old cell, or the demon version of angry sobbing anyway, a mix of snarls and half shrieks that died away.

Mia almost covered her ears. It was the last thing she wanted to hear, but she had work to do.

"Vinicius, close the door."

The colossus nodded and shut his cell door behind them. It wasn't locked, but at least she couldn't hear Acelina anymore.

Mia ran up to one of the big metal cages, and tried one of the smaller keys she had. No good. She tried another, and nodded to the demon within as she felt something click in the padlock. The demon inside, crucified, stared down at her wide-eyed as she swung open the metal door of his cage.

"Uh, what're you doing?" Hannah asked.

"He told me where the keys were. I'm going to release him. I--"

She spun her head. Movement in the dungeon hall exit drew her eyes, the sound of metal clinking on metal, footsteps, and something else. Armor.

Adron dashed forward toward the hall, and the monolith of gold and bronze armor walking down it toward them. Hannah turned to face it, too. Vinicius, still behind them, did nothing but watch.

A blur of movement came for Mia, something else that was bronze and gold. It spun through the air, like a frisbee tossed on its side, and bits of red flew off its edges. A wet frisbee, soaked in red water. Coming straight for her.

Someone's hand pulled on Mia's shoulder. Mia went down. Her keys scattered over the floor. Whatever the person in armor had thrown, it crashed against the metal door of the cage Mia had swung open, and it slammed into the floor beside her.

An axe. It landed against the floor just like it'd been thrown, vertically, and one of its blades -- a double-sided axe -- hit the metal floor hard enough it sank into it a sliver, enough it didn't fall over. The metal sizzled and popped as a fresh coating of blood boiled and steamed over its edge.

It'd landed an inch away from Mia's head. She rolled away from it with a squeak, and clutched her hair where it'd touched the blade. Fire ran up her hair, and her squeak turned into a shriek as she clutched it with both hands. The fire died fast, and she breathed relief as she looked back up at Hannah.

"What--"

Hannah turned her head, and looked down at her. Where'd she get one of those red silk sash things Acelina had? It dangled from her neck over her chest.

Mia froze. Ice returned and petrified her spine. Her lungs stopped working. Everything stopped working.

Hannah's hand held the side of her neck, and the deep gash that cut across it. Very deep. Even with her hand over it, Mia could see how the axe had cut through it by several inches, and had hit her collar bone before going past her into the cage door.

"Hannah..."

Hannah looked at her, eyes slowly coming to reality. She stumbled once, took a step forward, and looked to Adron.

"A... dron?"

A single moment, a sliver of time, and Hannah's eyes changed. Gaze still on Adron, Hannah took another step forward. The number on her forehead changed to 665, and she fell.

Her corpse went still beside Mia, and blood flowed from the huge, empty space between her neck and shoulder. The second woman to die beside Mia today.

"Hannah!"

Mia snapped her gaze back. Adron ran up to Mia, looked down at his pet, and changed. The whimsy drained from his eyes, and his demon brows furrowed with hate and rage Mia had never seen on him, or any other demon@w.w.n0vE1W0rm.com

He reached down, did not look at Mia, and instead grabbed the long hilt of the axe. The grip hissed and smoked, burning his skin. He didn't care. With a roar that sounded all too similar to Kasimiro or even Vinicius, Adron ran down the hall toward the armored figure.

Whoever that was in the gold and bronze armor, they looked human, huge, and had a skull-like medieval helmet. The t-slit visor hid their face in shadow. Another axe waited in their other hand, and while Adron had a foot of height on the armored figure, they didn't move an inch as the huge demon brought the axe down with both hands. The armored figure blocked it with one.

"The rider," Vinicius said.

"The rider... Vinicius! Stop him!wWw.n0vE1W0rm.com

Vinicius slowly set his gaze on Mia, rumbled, and looked down the hall to his fellow demon. Hannah didn't even warrant a glance from him.

"No."

"No!?" Mia forced her eyes away from Hannah's paling skin and got to her feet. Don't think about it don't think about it. "Help him!"

"No."©(w.N0vE1W0rm.Co©

"What do you mean, no!?"

"We're leaving. That's it."w.w.n0ve1W0rm.©om

"That's it!?" She marched up to the twelve-foot four-armed colossus and pointed a finger back at Adron while her eyes glared daggers into him. "If you don't help him, I'll use the leash!" This asshole was horrible! Worse than horrible! "He killed Hannah! He's going to kill Adron! Stop the rider!"

Vinicius glared down at her, and more rumbles flowed out of him, quiet bassy things that she felt more than heard. All she could hear was her own breathing, and the clang of metal from the hall. Adron screamed, roared, everything between, and brought the axe down onto the rider again and again and again. And when Mia looked his way, everything got worse again.

Adron made no progress. He got a few hits in, but they did nothing to the rider's armor. The rider continued to walk forward, swinging his axe with almost casual ease, and each attack forced Adron back. No matter his rage or the volume of his demon screams, the vratorin continued to lose ground against the rider.

The hallway was the only way out of the dungeon. With how unhurriedly the rider pushed forward, he had to know that, too. And he was coming for Mia. Coming to kill her. He'd thrown an axe at her. Almost killed her!

Hannah had saved her, and died for it.

"Please," Mia said, and she pounded both hands against one of the giant legs. "Please!"

He rumbled louder, snarled deeper, and set his dragon gaze on the hallway in front of him. He took a step back, one hand still clutching his gut. Before she could yell at him, or maybe use the leash, his free lower hand reached down and pushed her back into the hallway behind him. The door back to his cell at the end of the hall was closed, Acelina still inside, and Vinicius continued to push Mia back until she was safely in the hall.

His spikes began to glow.

"Vinicius!" she screamed, standing behind him. "What--" Heat hit her, waves of it that burned the air, warped the air, blurred and bent her vision, and she raised her hands to protect her eyes.

Hints of amber danced up the base of his spikes, highlighting the tiny, almost invisible grooves along the black surfaces. Symmetrical patterns of the deadly red and orange pulsed on the spikes, minuscule but in the hundreds, with each spike holding a couple dozen of the glowing dots along their undersides. They grew brighter and brighter, until they pulsed as bright as Zel's horn once did. Every spike glowed, from the enormous ones at the base of his giant tail and the massive ones along his back, to his horns that came up and back from his head.

A deep rumble poured out from his chest. It didn't sound like his usual voice or his usual rumbles, the few times she'd heard them. It sounded harsher. Was that crackling? Like... stirred embers?