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~David~

He sat up, clutching his chest. Eyes wide, he looked around. Not a swamp. No bog of black water, trenches filled with bones and gore, or thick fog that warped the color of the fire sky. No giant mounds of maggots. No angel, stabbing him through the heart.

It hadn't been him. It'd been someone else, a girl, and not Mia, either. No freckles on the arms.

"David? What's wrong?" Jes asked. She squatted nearby, half facing the exit to their small alcove, half facing Acelina, who sat across from David. The taller demon sat up slowly, coming to wake with the ending of night.www.novelworm.com

"I... I... had a dream."

Jes tilted her head to the side, stared at him for a few seconds, and came closer.

"You what?"

"I... had a dream. I was... a girl."

"Uh, what? Mia?"

"No, someone else. I was running through a black swamp. There were maggots everywhere, the air was dark, trenches lined the ground like veins and were filled with intestines."www.novelworm.com

"The Black Valley," Acelina said, stretching her wings. "You dreamt of the Black Valley?"

"Did I? I don't know. I thought people didn't dream in the afterlife?"

"They don't," Jes said. "What else?"

"I was running, or the girl in the dream was. She fell, and... an angel stabbed her, straight through the heart."

"Jesus christ," Jes said, and she sat down next to him. "That's fucked up. First and only dream in Hell and it's a death omen?"

"I don't know if it was a death omen or whatever. It was... random. I have no connection to this girl, and--"

"See her reflection anywhere?" Jes asked.

"No. I don't know what she completely looks... looked like, but--oooh, you think she was an unmarked?"

"After what we learned, I have to guess yeah, sounds like she probably was."

He sat back and covered his face with his hands.

"I felt her die. I felt..." He shivered and rubbed his arms. "Fucking god, that was messed up."

"Sounds like you're connected to the other unmarked. Sounds like... Sounds like something to talk to Caera about, when this bitch isn't around." She gestured to Acelina with a wing.

"Please," Acelina said with a snooty laugh. "You have told me much, whether you meant to or not."

"Yeap, we have. I should probably kill you so you don't tell anyone."

With a heavy scoff, Acelina got to her hooves.

"Don't be ridiculous. I am trapped by circumstance. Who could I talk to?"

"Oh I dunno, Domicela?"

Acelina folded her arms under her breasts, and her wings over her shoulders, cape style.www.novelworm.com

"Perhaps, but Domicela is separated from the Death's Grip spire, regardless. She has little means to take advantage of the situation, if she would even want to. And, I will owe you for helping me. Do you trust me so little?"

"Yes, I trust you so little."

Acelina grinned. "Prudent."

"Ugh, shut up." Jes got up and helped David do the same. "No one dreams in Hell. If you saw something while you were sleeping, something that specific, yeah, I can only guess it was another unmarked."

He hadn't told Jes about the symbols in his head since touching Mia, or the way it'd felt electrically charged. It was just a mess in his mind that didn't make sense yet. Soon, he'd say something, probably when talking with Caera, but for the moment he just wanted to think about shit.

He held out a hand in front of him and gently squeezed the air. He felt... different. Dying in that dream had been horrific, but it'd come with a jolt, too, like someone had shocked his spine. It felt all too similar to the sensation he'd first felt when touching Mia.

Something had changed.

Something inside him wanted to... pluck strings.

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"Holy shit," he whispered.

"Holy shit," Jes whispered.

Acelina clicked once.

The valley was a mess of bodies. More demons had come since David had run through the battle, many in black armor, many naked, not a one in gold. Probably stripped and taken to the leaning spire. Imps and grems swarmed over the valley by the thousands, ripping and tearing at the corpses, along with larger demons looking for easy meals. Not even twenty-four hours later and the hundreds of dead looked thoroughly picked clean, rib cages ripped open.

No sign of the giant lizard hellbeast. Did it fall into the canyon? Not likely. He'd have noticed a Godzilla creature falling into the ravine, probably accompanied by a deafening roar, even with the rider trying to kill him. It must have escaped. Not that it would have been of much value to demons dead, considering hellbeasts didn't store any resonance in their bodies. No point in eating them.

So many demons. Thousands. They flowed in and out of the spire, jumped and glided from its balconies, but none attempted to fly across the ravine. It had to be a mile wide, maybe more, and nothing heavier than an imp or grem was gliding across it. And that was just width. The length of the canyon, now that he was above it, was just as absurd. It didn't stop. It just went on, and on, and on, until it blurred into the distance with the reds and blacks.

A crack. It was like Hell was a piece of glass, and someone had cracked it, creating a huge, thin vein that ran its length.

The spire was doing a little better, not tilting or leaning as much. It was healing. The base half was already regrowing its flesh walls, bones and muscle reforming along the black metal skeleton. At this rate, it'd probably take a month for the spire to fully heal, but that didn't change that its base was still half exposed, the other half holding onto the cliff face of the ravine.

"I didn't realize there were so many demons nearby," he said, gesturing to the thousands of demons big and small that filled the valley. Many stood by the ravine on the spire's side, looking down into the pit. Not as many stood on his side of the canyon, but the hundreds that did looked just as confused. Thankfully, they were all too distracted by their hunt for food, armor, weapons, and the confusion of the void below, to bother looking toward the mountains where David and the two ladies journeyed.

"The attack was swift," Acelina said, and she crouched over the edge of the canyon where it split and weaved between the base of their mountain and other mountains. "If Zelandariel had had time, she could have perhaps summoned the horde. Thousands, tens of thousands of demons would have arrived within hours."[www.fiveleworm.com](http://www.fiveleworm.com)

"Exaggerating a bit, there," Jes said, shrugging.

Snarling, Acelina shook her head and looked down over the edge of the canyon.

"Last Zelandariel told me, she believed Death's Grip had at least a hundred thousand demons, not including the imps and grems. Her dueling rule worked well."

Jes whistled. "Okay, yeah, that's more than I figured."

"I believe it," David said, gesturing out to the demons down in the valley. "What happened to the demons in aera armor?"

"They got butchered," Jes said. "Eventually, anyway. They took down a few hundred demons before they went down."

"The rider sacrificed them?" David asked. "That's... cruel."

Acelina aimed her eyeless gaze David's way, paused, said nothing, and looked back down into the emptiness below. The void remained, stirring and shifting, motionless and eternal. And just like last time, cold chills ran through David's limbs. He couldn't look at it too long.

"I suppose you have no clue what that is," Acelina said.

Jes and David shook their heads. Much as David had shared some secrets with Acelina, telling her about the invisible thing that'd tried to kill him a week ago was a bit too far. Let Caera make that call.

"Of course not." With a growl, Acelina flared her wings as she squatted down at the canyon edge. "Whatever it is, whatever has happened, I can only guess at the ramifications." She rolled a rock into the canyon. By the time it reached the bottom, just a speck in the distance, it broke apart before reaching the void. Broke, and vanished. "What... is that?"