

## 1317

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--Mia--

Vin fell and fell hard. An electric jolt through the body was not something you could ever get used to, and if the spire leash was anything like that, every muscle in Vin's body was going haywire while pain simultaneously overloaded his brain. From the half gargled roars and giant muscle twitches, that was exactly what he was going through, and he collapsed onto all four hands as his knee spikes rubbed their blunt sides against the stone.

Azreal fell with him, and landed on the ground hard, too. A single flap of his wings was all he managed before his boots hit the stone, and the weight of his armor and shield cracked the ground around him. He knelt there, panting and coughing up blood, leaning weight onto his shield and his spear with its grip planted on the ground. Poor guy.

Mia held onto her bodyguard's back spikes long enough for Vin to land before she hopped off. Oh god, she'd made a big mistake. Blood poured from Vin's shoulder where Shir had stabbed through him, and a pool of the red liquid quickly spread from under Vin's arm, not to mention the holes in one of his hands and legs. His tail was even worse off, a huge gash several feet long from near the tip down the thick length. Angel swords were sharpWww.NDreLwP\*(©).©Om

Or, angels were just that powerful. The weapons weren't real, physical, metal things. Azreal's spear had poofed out of existence when Vin had grabbed it, and reappeared in his hand. And Shir's sword, shield, and armor were all gone.

The runes in Mia's brain shined brightly and danced in her eyes, three in particular: potram, royam, and batlam. Batlam swam around in her thoughts, brushing the other runes aside, and demanded her attention. It only grew brighter the closer she got to the angel.

She clutched her necklace, and the amber arc vanished. Vin stopped half choking on his roars, but stayed on his hands and knees, panting like a wild animal. The first time Mia used the necklace on purpose, and it might just get her killed if the angels took advantage. Thankfully, they were all just as beat up as Vin, Noah behind them struggling to get up with blood leaking out of various spots in his armor, Shir flat on her chest, and Azreal stuck in his kneeling position as his blood also leaked out from his boots.

Mia sucked in a deep breath, got down on a knee, and pushed Shir over enough to look at her face.

"Oh thank god," she said. "Still alive." Alive and ridiculously beautiful. It was almost unfair how beautiful, a young woman's face with the perfectly symmetrical features you expected to find on a fashion magazine cover. Combined with her muscular-but-feminine perfect body, and now that Mia got an incidental chance to peek, her rather busty body, it truly was hilariously unfair. The fact she had green -- emerald -- eyes, red hair, and freckles, was too much, and Mia couldn't help but chuckle weakly as she and the angel traded gazes again.

Warm. The angel's bare shoulder was warm.

"Why?" Shir asked.

"Why? Because... Because! I don't know what's going on or why everyone's trying to kill me, but..." But what? She saw in Shir's eyes, and in Noah and Azreal's eyes, that they didn't want to kill her, and because Mia was a weak-willed, overly empathetic and sensitive little girl, she couldn't let Vin kill them. "Because I don't want to hurt anyone."

Vin snarled and shot her a deadly look, but his attempt to get up failed as much as Noah's. Only Azreal had the foresight to stop trying to move when all it did was make him bleed more.

"No one's told me what's going on," Mia said. "No one! But I'm not going to just let myself get killed, either."

"Even if--" Noah coughed, and a splatter of blood hit the ground. Vin had thoroughly destroyed the man's insides with his hammering blows. "Even if you spell the doom of the Great Tower?"

"Even if I..." She turned and stared at Noah. "Even if I what?"

The angel flapped his burned wings until he was up on his feet, and continued to do so, only one foot touching the ground and only with the tip of a toe. He couldn't land, and blood dripped from the boot. No wounds on the outside Mia could see, but it was a wonder the angel wasn't a flat piece of roadkill.

"The council has sent scouting parties to find and kill the unmarked," Noah said, "as you surmised." He hovered closer, and Mia took a step closer to Vin, but her bodyguard was still panting and trembling. If it wasn't for Noah also trembling and struggling to keep sword and shield in hand, he'd probably go for her. "And, as you surmised, it is a life or death matter."

Well, at least they were having a conversation now, even as Noah slowly came closer and closer. Yeap, he was going to try and kill her if he got the chance. So she slipped under Vin's chest and kept him between her and Noah, while keeping Azreal in the corner of her eye.

"So you think I'll destroy the Great Tower? The, uh, everything everything tower?"

Noah frowned, paused over Shir, and gently lowered himself down beside her. The relief on his face was blatant, and he patted the woman on her shoulder once as he checked her wounds. Finally, someone else with a little empathy.

"I trust the council," he said, flapping his blackened wings again until he was a few feet in the air. Slowly, he pointed his shaking sword at Mia, and ignored the blood trail he left behind him. "Submit, for the sake of us all."

She stomped her foot. "Did the council tell you the unmarked are going to destroy the Great Tower?"

Noah said nothing, but he hardened his silver eyes as he stared at her. He still had his helmet on, but like when Shir had hers, the front of it was open enough she could see his face, the perfect stubble, and bits of dark blond hair hidden along the sides of his jaw. The lack of expression or response was her answer.

"The will of the council is clear," he said at last. "We--" A shudder worked through him, a small puff of gold lit the area, and his shield disappeared. Snarling, he flapped his wings a little harder, but his weight dragged him down again, and his toe touched the ground once more. "Azrael. Kill her."

Mia half squeaked and jumped back. Azreal had, at some point, lifted his spear and pointed it at her. Suddenly, his kneeling position didn't look so much like he was recovering from getting smashed into cliff walls half a dozen times, but like he was getting ready to leap at Mia and stab her.

But he didn't. Azreal didn't have his helmet anymore, and if what was happening to Noah was any explanation, he didn't have the energy to resummon it. There was nothing stopping Mia from staring at the man, his short and messy dark hair, clean shaven tan skin, and purple eyes. Amethyst eyes stared right back at her, but fell as something heavy pulled them downward.

"Azreal!" Noah yelled.

Mia stood beside Vin, the beast still on hands and knees, head mostly facing toward Azreal. All Azreal had to do was leap around Vin to get to Mia. He didn't.

"She's not like the other one," Azreal said.

"It doesn't matter. We have to end her."Ww©.m(©)vEi©ótM.cOm

Azreal looked to Noah, and then to Vin. The demon lifted his head enough to glare at Azreal, only maybe fifteen feet between them, as he lifted a colossal leg and put his weight on his talons again. He fared no better than Noah, and a fresh wave of blood gushed from his wounds as he failed to get back to his feet. Fuck.

"I will deal with the ragarin first," Azreal said, standing up. Double fuck.

"You can't kill him!" Mia yelled. "I need him. He... He's my protector."

Azreal shook his head and held his spear out at arm's length in front of him.

"He's a child of the Old Ones. An abomination."

"He's my bodyguard! I need him!"

"He--"

A roar cut through the ravine. Vin's? No. It didn't come from any of the angels, either.

Everyone looked up as a pair of giant bat-like wings with black fingers and a red membrane descended on them. A demon. A really, really big demon. Not Vin big, but a ten-foot-tall demon with a wingspan at least double that was still big enough it cast them all in a blurry shadow as the tetrad fell upon them.

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