

1377

"I can imagine," Yosepha said. "What I cannot imagine, is any soul having enough essence to use batlam, even on a full stomach. As you saw with Shir, when she no longer had the essence to hold onto batlam, it was lost, and she defaulted to potram; something that comes with training." She gestured to Mia, who was naked because holy fuck using potram while trying to use batlam was not an extra challenge she needed. "Souls are meek, Mia. They cannot so much as resist the weakest of auras."

Mia planted her ass against the wall and sank down to the ground.

"There's a but coming, right?"

"But you are no ordinary soul. We should find you something to eat, and--"

"Can... Can you make sure it's a forbidden fruit, and not someone's heart?"

Yosepha tilted her head. "Unlikely. Fruits are rare. Demons eat them or hide them for later."

"I know, I just..." Mia pulled her knees up to her chest. With her forehead against her wrist, hopefully the angel wouldn't see her eyes. "Please?"

"Mia, this cannot wait. I will leave before the morrow, and I would prefer to be here to learn if you can use this rune. It is important for more than just yourself, but knowledge for me when dealing with the other unmarked."

"But, if you give me a heart..." Fuck it. "I'll see the memories again."

"What?"

"The memories." After a deep breath, Mia forced her head up, and met eyes with the angel. "When I eat a heart, I see the memories. The bad memories. They fill my thoughts for a few seconds, and then get... filed away, somewhere in the back of my mind, like some kind of library."

Yosepha stared at her, drifting from surprised to angry. Uh oh.

"You only tell me this now?"

"I'm sorry! Every word out of my mouth could be my last, you know? What if I say the wrong thing, and you or Romakus decide I'm too dangerous to keep alive?"

Her point hit home, and Yosepha sighed as she walked over to her.

"I understand your concern, child. In fact, I suggest you do not speak of this to the others."

"Vinicius knows."w w w . n o v e l W o r M . c o m

"I doubt the child of Belial will say anything he does not need to. He delights in being combative."

"Ain't that the truth."w W (w) . c o e l W o r m . c o m

Yosepha stood over her and patted her with a wing again.

"I won't kill you, unless you betray me, or are an immediate risk to the safety of Heaven or the Great Tower. And you said yourself, you would kill yourself if that were the case, correct?"

"I... did."

"Then you would want to know if you were such, correct?"

"I suppose..."

The angel squatted down in front of her and set a hand on her shoulder.

"It is easy to say brave words. It is a different thing entirely to enact them."

Mia groaned and squirmed. Called out. She was a pussy.

"When I eat a demon heart, I get very... tingly, and jazzed up. It makes me feel strong, but I also get these flashes in my mind showing me the worst things the demon has done. Violent stuff, you know?"

"And a human heart?"

"I don't know. I haven't had one. And... I think I'd prefer to keep it that way, if possible."

"It won't be possible. On this journey, you must eat when you can, and that may force some horrible choices upon you. And if you have eaten demon hearts and forbidden fruit, I can only assume you could eat a human heart without issue."

"Unless that gives me bad memories, too."

"Yes, that is... unfortunate." The angel stood up and gave her a heavy nod. "Stay here."

Before Mia could say anything, Yosepha turned and left, using her wings to propel herself with pure elegance. She flew with the grace of a hummingbird, dodging and weaving around the cave walls with ease. She also didn't go back to the potram rune, keeping her armor on instead.

It wasn't long before she returned, sword and shield gone, and each hand holding a heart, blood included.

"That was fast."

"Yes," the angel said. "I can be quite persuasive."w w w . n o v e l c o e l W o r m . c o m

Mia raised a brow. Joke? The angel's face was stern and hard, as usual. The ultimate straight man... woman. No wonder Romakus loved teasing her.

"One's bigger than the other," Mia said, and gestured to the two hearts.

"Some demons were returning from a hunt. I... alleviated them of their prize. One is a vratorin heart. The other is human." Yosepha squatted in front of her again, wings out, and she handed both of the big muscle lumps to Mia. "Eat."

"Ugh." Groaning like waking up on a Saturday morning too early, she took the hearts. They were warmer than they should have been, as if the resonance and essence within kept them fresh and... tasty. "You don't want one?"

"I... would prefer to not eat a demon's heart. It can be problematic for angels. As for the human heart, I cannot gain resonance this way."

"What?"

Yosepha smiled, but it was weak. Even a little sad?

"Angels cannot acquire the resonance of someone who did not offer it willingly." She leaned in close enough to almost touch noses, and whispered. "Do not share that information."

"Would be dangerous if demons found out?" It wasn't easy to keep the eye connection considering how intense the angel's dark eyes were, but Mia managed, somehow.

"No. I have told you nothing that you could use against us, but that does not mean I want demons gossiping about angels. They know little of our kind, and we would keep it that way." She nudged Mia's hands. "Eat, and describe to me what you see."

Sighing, Mia took a bite of the demon heart. Sure enough, a swarm of memories hit her, some tiny, some large, all revolving around the vratorin committing heinous acts of violence. Killing, killing, and more killing. Did Adron do things like this? Yes, undoubtedly, but was he this bad?

It wasn't long before the heart was gone. The tingling filled her, warmed her, made her aches and pains go away, and made her want to get up and go do something. Anything. Punch someone. Fuck someone. Life poured through her, out into her fingertips, and made her feel so damn good.

The human heart waited. Yosepha waited.

"Do you have the room for the second heart as well?" Yosepha asked.

"Room? You mean, do I feel full?"W w w . N O v e l () w . R c o e m

"Yes. A vratorin heart is no small meal."

"I mean, I don't feel hungry anymore, but full? What's it like to feel full on essence? Or... Or resonance, if I'm somehow absorbing that, too." Considering she was absorbing memories, the idea had been haunting her for a while. It was yet another nail in the not-human coffin.

"It is a difficult sensation to describe, but I suppose it is similar to how you would feel on the surface."

"Then definitely not. How many hearts does that take?"

"I am not sure. You would have to ask a demon, or another soul. Regardless, eat the human heart."

Mia winced and looked at the hunk of meat in her hand. For a second she wanted to throw it away, and maybe fake being full, but that ship had sailed, and this was too important to get squeamish about.

She ate the heart. It was just as delicious as the demon's, and just like the demon's, it flooded her mind with flashes.

A woman, spreading lies to get herself a promotion. Spreading lies to ruin someone else's relationship. Whoever she was, she put some sort of cleaner in someone's food, poisoning them.

She lied and got someone else arrested for something she did. Frequent drunk driving; the memories of that were a messy blur. Just an all around horrible bitch, but probably with a low number. And her heart tasted fucking divine.

Mia stood back up, wiped the blood from her mouth and fingers as best she could, and did some quick stretches that were probably useless.

"Full?"

"Not yet."

Yosepha frowned, but gestured to her.

"Regardless, best to try again now."

"Okay."

Yosepha backed away, and Mia signed the rune in her head once more. The fingers that plucked the strings traced the lines of the rune, and again, the weight of its existence crashed into her like a truck, a truck she had to also lift.

The energy tingling through her limbs grabbed the weight, and lifted, or at least stopped the weight from sending her to the ground. It latched onto her, pulled on her, tried to crush her, and Mia clenched her teeth together until a dentist would have screamed.

A gold glow enveloped her, and a new type of weight hit her, something physical and real, and hard. Armor? The weight pulling on her soul didn't abate, though, and demanded she lift it more. It was like a deadlift, and she was stuck halfway. But she could keep going. She pulled, and pulled, and pulled, panting louder until her voice turned into a clenched groan.