

## Sneak Peek of Demon in Disguise

Even in a liminal wasteland ruled by chaos magic, where every second was objectively miserable and cartoonishly dangerous, this listing wall made of human bones, some with hair and sinew still attached, was, quite frankly, a bit much.

I grimaced at the eyeless skull jammed unceremoniously between two femurs. “Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio.”

My half sister, Maud Liu, uncapped her Nalgene. “A man of that infinite a jest wouldn’t rock a toupee.” The British notes in her voice were flavored by her native Hong Kong accent. “That low-budget costume piece stuck to his pate marks him a Boris or, no, wait. Shiny Jimmy.” She took a long swig, blotting sweat off her forehead with her free hand.

The arid heat sandblasted our skin and had me swallowing every few seconds to keep moisture in my mouth.

I pulled out a finger bone that jugged out of the wall and touched it to the top of the skull like I was knighting him. “Shiny Jimmy. A petty thug with big dreams.”

“A brawler of very little brain,” Maud replied. “I may have dated him in my early twenties. Any protein bars left?”

I rummaged in the heavy pack resting in the dirt against the wall and tossed her a coconut-flavored one, grabbing a handful of trail mix for myself.

After nine hours of battling unpredictable weather, manic terrain, and distances with a maddening habit of contracting and expanding at will, our quest to find a secret fortress here in the Brink had led us to this single file dirt track alongside the aforementioned bone wall.

I squatted down and sketched a tic-tac-toe grid in the dirt with the finger bone. “Play you for the last trail mix with M&M’s while we wait for—”

The ground rumbled so violently that my teeth rattled. Suddenly, the bones in one long section of the wall exploded out to fan themselves in a herky-jerky motion before fusing together in a nightmarish *mélange*, piling higher and higher until the creature’s shadow blotted out the sun.

Which wasn’t a bad thing, given how hot it was.

Less ideal was the giant wearing a kneecap like a jaunty beret, a waterfall of ribs on its left side, and arm bones sticking out every which way. He rocked on webbed feet cobbled together from a couple of pelvic bones and part of a spine.

A second skull, at about butt cheek height, worked its boney mouth. "I AM SHINY JIMMY."

Ezra Cardoso, sole remaining Prime among all the vampires in existence, blurred to a stop next to us, wearing a very human peeved expression. Streaks of dirt marred his T-shirt and jeans, his motorcycle boots were scuffed, and his jet-black curls were a riotous halo in this humidity. He raised an eyebrow. "You named it?"

Maud and I exchanged guilty looks.

"Only jokingly," I said lamely.

"YOU HAVE OFFENDED ME," Shiny Jimmy said. "NOW YOU WILL PAY."

Ezra huffed a sigh that was purely for show since breathing wasn't a requirement for my ex. "Please inform them how they have caused offense so they may grovel for forgiveness."

"Really?" I stepped forward, my hands planted on my hips.

"This is not the hill to die on," he muttered, snagging my damp shirt and tugging me backward.

"YOU DO NOT EVEN KNOW THE CAUSE OF YOUR OFFENSE?" Shiny Jimmy beat on the patchwork of bones forming his chest. His butt-high skull gnashed its jawbones together.

"Would you have preferred Boris?" Maud said.

Shiny Jimmy roared and swung a fist made of teeth and ropey muscle at her.

Ezra barely got her out of harm's way, only to be clocked in the side of the head. "What did you do?" he snapped, wincing as his fingers probed a tender spot.

"Nothing!" I flung my arms up in the air.

Light glistened off the fingerbone I clutched.

"Ohhhhhh." I held it out to Shiny Jimmy. "You want this back?"

Ezra dropped his head in despair.