

~~Mia~~

Mia, Vinicius, Romakus, Julisa, Livian, Faust and the other incubi, and a bunch of other demons, stood in the big chamber. The primary chamber, with the biggest stalactites and stalagmites Mia had ever seen. Many demons sat on the huge rocks, or perched on them, and they watched with interest.

Vin stood, but he held a stalagmite, determined to not let his weight and wounds drag him down. It was strangely cute, in that boyish 'refuse to show weakness' kinda way. Then again, with demons, any sign of weakness was an invitation for a fight.

Julisa licked her lips, eyes constantly drifting Vin's way, and even wearing her armor, she rubbed her belly with her claws a few times. Remembering what it felt like to be so full, probably. Her first time sleeping with a child of the Old Ones, maybe, considering how rare they were, and she'd enjoyed it.

She also looked Mia's way and licked her fangs. So did Livian. So did Romakus, and the other demons. Faust and Gallius and the other incubi were a little more subtle, no blatant teeth licking, but they did look at her and grin. Only Yosepha didn't stare at Mia's naked body like she was a popsicle, though she glanced her way a few times.

Mia looked back at her, and her silk toga-like clothes. A rune pulsed in Mia's mind, and it grew brighter as she took in Yosepha's sandals and their laces that went up her leg, her gold jewelry, her gold tattoos on her dark skin, and her gold lipstick. The potram rune. Batlam and royam floated in the background, too, but potram glowed bright.

The rune recognized the angel. Or at least, it recognized what she was... wearing? Or, what she was doing? Some combination thereof? When she'd seen the angels in their armor with their weapons, batlam had been the one to glow brightest. Something to do with armor, and weapons, and battle. Potram was what? What was Yosepha doing right now that was worthy of a rune to describe it? To embody it?

Not fighting?

"We are gathered here today," Romakus said, and he pressed his hands together in front of him like he was praying, "to discuss the future of this unmarked soul, Mia. Mia... Mia what, exactly?"

She frowned up at him and folded her arms across her breasts. Time to take a page out of Vinicius's book. She said nothing.

“Alright. We’re here to discuss the future of Mia the Unmarked. We, the Damall—”

“Is this all the Damall in Death’s Grip?” Mia asked, tapping her foot. If she was going to do her best to be confident, not let her nudity bother her, and not show any weakness, she had to lean into it. “A couple dozen demons?”

The three tetrads grinned at each other. The other demons raised eyebrows. None of them were used to a soul speaking out of turn. Well, fuck them. She’d done the prisoner shtick before and she wasn’t about to roll over and take it again. She had a mission this time, one she might actually accomplish if she could get Vin healed up.

“There’s more of us,” Yulia the bat girl said from atop a stalagmite. “We can’t all just gather up in one place!”

Romakus held up a hand, blatantly mimicking a priest’s mannerisms.

“Do not entertain the unmarked’s questions. But, yes, it is true that there are far more Damall than present.” Romakus flared his wings with a flourish. “But here in Death’s Grip, they all answer to me. And if you do not answer me as well, I will—”

“Bring it.” Mia tapped her foot a little harder, earning some laugh from Julisa and Livian. Even Vinicius rumbled a quiet chuckle.

“Romakus, enough,” Yosepha said. “I don’t know if the unmarked are souls worthy of Heaven’s protection or not, but after seeing this girl and her brother myself, I am convinced she is to be spared. For now.”

Romakus rolled his eyes with the exaggerated motion of an awful actor. Too much scrying pool.

Yosepha flared her wings and pointed at the demons with a slow waving finger.

“If any of you so much as touch the girl without permission, I will deal with you myself. Understood?”

Holy shit, the demons actually looked scared. All except the tetrads reared their heads back slightly, or looked down, or did anything to appear a little meeker than before. And that was weird. Demons didn’t do that with other demons, even when facing a stronger demon.

“We’re going to exchange some information,” Romakus said, hooking his wings snug to his back as he squatted down in front of Mia. “So far, we know that all the unmarked are probably the same age, and all died on the surface at the same time. We know they, or at least a sizable portion, all showed up at

the Gate of Heaven before the Hell portal scooped them up. You bypassed the Gates of Hell.” His tail snuck around him and pointed at her forehead. “Correct?”

“Correct.” Answering questions was a tricky problem. If she answered too many, they may decide they didn’t need her anymore, or maybe she’d accidentally say something Yosepha considered kill worthy. Where was David when she needed him?

“That has never happened,” Yosepha said. “In the history of existence.”

“The history of existence?” Mia stared at her, blinking. That was a powerful statement.

“Heaven keeps her records and keeps them well.” Nodding, the angel paced in place as she pulled her wings in snug to her back. “If I ask of the council for confirmation, I will. But never has there been mention of unmarked souls in Hell.”

“Heaven has records? How far back?”

Yosepha shook her head. “The council keeps the records. I cannot simply walk into the great library and acquire that information.”

“The council? The big angels, like the one I saw at the gate?”

“Yes. It is by their will that the unmarked have been sentenced to death. It is by their will the records of the ancient past are only shared piecemeal to those they consider worthy.” With an annoyed grunt, Yosepha folded her arms across her chest and scowled. Even her wings half fluttered in an angry kinda way. “As you can surmise from my words, we angels are often kept in ignorance. It is one of the reasons I am here, aiding the Damall, and not simply killing you as ordered.”

Mia smiled. Much as Yosepha was the angry sort, she was intrinsically different to the demons. No demon would be so forthcoming with information, but the angel had a desire to do the right thing, to make it happen, and it probably wasn’t even crossing her mind that every word she said could be used against her if heard by someone particularly manipulative. Or, maybe she did know, but trusted the demons to not exploit her.

Mia eyed Romakus, and he grinned at her, almost like he knew what she was thinking. Maybe he was. A sneaky, manipulative bastard like him, hooking up with a righteous and kind-hearted, but maybe a little simple angel? That was an... oddly cute couple, assuming he wasn’t just using her.

Romakus spoke next. “Why the angels are killing the unmarked is a mystery, and it’s a mystery we’re trying to solve. Anything that screws with the balance is bad. A giant crack in Hell, and

something... something beneath it, something aware and maybe alive? Yeah, we've entered major unbalancing territory here, not seen since Lucifer created the vortex."

"And you think I know what's going on?"

"More than us," Yosepha said. "You will tell us what you know, so that we can keep the balance."

Sighing, Mia half sat, half leaned against a big rock, and donned her best frown again.

"So you can just kill me when you know everything?"

Romakus laughed. "We could always torture it out of you."

"Bullshit. You know torture doesn't work like that. I'd tell you anything to make the pain stop."

"And I wouldn't allow it," Yosepha said. "Until I see otherwise, I will consider the unmarked deserving of some level of protection. She may not be in Heaven, but she is unmarked, and is perhaps worthy of the holy waters of her eternal embrace."

Mia's frown melted, and she beamed.

Romakus grumbled down at Yosepha in an exaggerated, almost playful way, and pushed her back with one of his colossal wings. Which she responded to by grabbing its membrane from underneath, earning an also exaggerated yelp from the demon as she yanked the titan to the side. They were a cute couple, if a bit volatile.

"Okay," Mia said. "I'll tell you... some stuff. Because of her." She gestured to Yosepha, and the angel returned it with a very serious nod. The woman was not the sort to relax, or even smile. Mia liked her. "My brother and I were sitting and eating breakfast when we died. It was completely random. Nothing happened to us. No one killed us. We just... died. It was painful, like everything inside us decided to break at the same time, and ten seconds later we were dead. Both of us, at the same time."

"Strange," Yosepha said, "and unnatural."

"Yeah. We stuck around for over two weeks to see what the coroner would say. They found nothing. When we finally entered the gold light we kept finding everywhere, we stepped out onto big stairs, taking us up to a big, gold gate. Heaven's gate. We walked up, and when we tried to pass the gate, it blocked us. Like, full on, walked into glass, nearly broke my nose sorta block." Sighing, she rubbed her arms, hugging herself. "Then the portal to Hell swallowed us up. We got separated the moment we hit the red river it dumped us over."

Yosepha and the three tetrads all nodded, listening intently. The other demons, not so much.

“I got taken to Diogo, and he took me to Zel, expecting a reward or something for bringing an unmarked. They quickly figured out I had an aura that was—”

“Arousing every demon and soul nearby,” Faust said, smiling at her.

She rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t stop herself from blushing. Pale skin and all that.

“It’s not a sin aura,” she said. “I don’t know what it is.” And she had no intention of telling them how it worked. For all she knew, giving details about the music her inner fingers plucked would brand her an abomination that needed to be executed. “Zel realized the angels were out in numbers, looking for something. She guessed it was me and maybe other unmarked, and she tried to figure out what was going on. Then the rider attacked.”

All the demons, save for the tetrads, sucked in a breath. The rider was the bogeyman even more than Vinicius was.

“He wanted to kill you?” Yosepha asked.

“Yeah. But, my brother showed up, and we escaped, and—”

Romakus gestured to Vinicius. “You’re skipping an awful lot. What happened to Zel? How’d Vinicius get loose? And why do you have his leash?”

Mia looked Vin’s way. Lie? Vin met her eyes, but said nothing, and used no body language. It was up to her.

“I was with Vin in his cell when the rider attacked. Zel left for a moment, and Vin... broke off a spike.” She gestured to his the spike on his shoulder, still missing most of its length. “Zel came back, and I stabbed her with it.”

Yosepha froze. Livian and Julisa. Romakus’s jaw dropped.

“You... killed Zelandariel?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Moment of truth. Mia killing Zel upset the balance of Hell pretty bad, and the Damall didn’t like that, apparently.

“A little pipsqueak like you?” Romakus laughed, and soon all the demons were laughing, Livian and Julisa included. “You killed the bitch?”

“Got her through the eye.” Okay. If she was going to own this ‘killed a spire ruler’ thing, in hopes it’d earn her street cred or something, she had to be confident about it.

What would David have done? Probably said the rider killed Zel. Yeah, that might have been a better idea. But she sucked at lying, and David was worse.

“Vinicius?” Julisa asked.

The beast rumbled and nodded.

“Well, damn,” Romakus said. “I should kill you for that.”

Ah, fuck.

Yosepha rolled her eyes and swatted her lover’s giant chest with a white wing.

“Spire rulers dying is not unheard of.”

Her lover disagreed. “Pretty rare, and power vacuums like that cause problems.”

Shaking her head, Yosepha stepped a little closer to Mia, entering the circle of demons.

“The Damall,” she said, “are concerned with keeping the balance. But spire rulers fighting and killing each other is not a threat to that balance. Heaven allows it, and continues to allow it. What threatens the balance”—she flared out her wings hard enough hair and demon dreadlocks shifted—“is anything that forces confrontation between Heaven and Hell, or allows Hell to affect the surface.”

“Hell, but not Heaven?” Mia asked.

“Heaven can already affect the surface. But we do not. That would defeat the purpose.”

Oh. Oh! Finally, an opportunity for answers!

“What—”

“I am not answering your questions about the purpose of life and death, unmarked. Regardless, that is a question for the council, and they would not answer you.”

Double fuck.

“Okay,” Mia said, doing her best to look Yosepha in the eyes. Her onyx eyes were beautiful, and inhuman. “So, the Damall are interested in me because you think I’ll do more than just... do things like kill a spire ruler?”

“Correct.”

“Like cracking Hell like a piece of glass,” Romakus said.

Mia sighed and shook her head. “I don’t know anything about that.” A half lie. “But I do know the rider showed up to kill me. We escaped.”

“With the help of a woman in aera armor,” Yosepha said. “The rider appears randomly and has for millennia. He brings destruction and slaughter whenever he appears, on a scale only... a child of the Old Ones could appreciate.” Everyone looked at Vinicius. Vinicius made the tiniest little smile, and said nothing. Yosepha continued. “The woman, on the other hand, hasn’t been seen for at least a thousand years.”

“Jesus,” Mia said, and snapped her hand up to her mouth. “Sorry.” Yosepha raised a brow. Okay, using Jesus as a curse didn’t bother the angel. Good to know. “Do... you know who they are?”

“We do not.”

“Not even the council?”

Yosepha glared at her. “I do not know. And I do not know why the woman saved you.”

“Do you know why they have flame wings? Like, wings of fire.”

The angel sighed and shook her head. Apparently, the fact the two strangers in aera armor had fire wings bothered her.

“You’re supposed to answer our questions,” Romakus said. “Why did she save you?”

“I...” Fuck. Fuck fuck fuck. What to do? What to say? She wanted to lie, but the Damall had not only saved her life, but if she told the truth, maybe the angel would help her. Angels could fly. Demons could only glide. Maybe Yosepha would take her straight to the Forgotten Place?

There was always the chance Yosepha was tricking them all so she could use Mia and find the other unmarked. Just because she seemed like a stalwart, ethical, simple angel didn’t mean she was.

Mia sucked in a breath. Time to risk it all.

“Whoever that woman was, she saved my life, and then she... she told me... I had to get to the Forgotten Place, or...” Mia forced herself to look Yosepha in the eyes. “Or everyone dies.”

The demons laughed. Yosepha didn’t. After a few seconds of pain, Mia squirming in place, Yosepha snapped out a wing and set her glare around the room. Every demon shut up on the spot.

“Everyone dies?” Yosepha asked.

“Y-Yeah. I couldn’t see her face or anything, so I don’t know if she was lying. But...” She gestured to Vinicius.

Every demon, still half smiling, obviously not believing her, all looked to Vinicius.

“I know her,” he said, deep voice rumbling in the stones. “She’s always serious.”

“You know her?” Yosepha marched up to Vinicius, fearless, practically stomping her sandals with each step.

“Yes.”

“What is her name?”

“I don’t know.”

Yosepha flared her wings as she got within several feet of the titan, glared up at him, and put her hands on her hips.

“You don’t know her name?”

“No.”

“But you know her?”

“She and the rider have fought many times,” Vinicius said. “And you know my history with the rider.”

“I do.” Yosepha gave Mia a glare. “I assume you know of his history as well?”

“Um, only some vague stuff, that him and the rider used to go around on slaughtering sprees. But now they’re enemies?” She jingled her chain necklace and the small amber stone hanging between her breasts. “I freed him because of the leash. I know Vinicius is a... a...” Careful. You have to work with Vin. Choose your words carefully. “A—”

“Bloodthirsty demon,” Julisa said, chuckling. “A monster with a kill count in the hundreds of thousands? Perhaps millions? A mindless beast addicted to slaughter and murder?”

Vinicius rumbled and eyed the big demon lady who’d just milked him of a couple orgasms only moments before. Either that was a ‘I’m going to kill you and eat you’ rumble, or a ‘I’m going to fuck you until you can’t walk’ rumble. Maybe both. They were too similar with Vin.

“How can you know so little about them?” Yosepha asked.

Vinicius shrugged with his one good shoulder. “Have you ever stood in the presence of the rider?”

“No.”

With a sinister grin on his dragon snout, he nodded toward Mia. Everyone looked at her.

“The rider,” Mia said, shivering, “he’s... got this aura. I don’t think it’s like mine, but it’s different from sin auras, too. It’s just... just a constant thing around him. It’s... not cold, or hot, but... violent. Violent in the murderly kinda way. Not violence for violence sake, but... but like, he actively wants to...



I don't know, make sure everyone is dead, you know? He didn't delight in killing, like a certain someone." She glared up at Vin, only to get a teeth-lick back from him. That tongue... Mia scrunched up her nose. "There was no joy in the rider, or his aura. It was all just... death."

The demons looked between each other. They didn't understand. Violence for violence's sake was something they understood, and delighted in, but wanting everyone dead purely for the desire to spread death, was not.

"We used each other," Vinicius said. "Nothing more."

Silence settled on the giant chamber, the only sound the distant wails of remnants.

"And the woman?" Yosepha asked.

"She and the rider avoid each other. Or they used to," Vin said. "We've talked before. She's warned me about angels in the past. I trust her."

Frowning, Yosepha paced in front of him, before setting her eyes on Mia again.

"She really told you everyone will die?"

"She did."

"Her exact words?"

"Exact words? She said 'or we're all doomed'. Scarred into my brain." Sighing, Mia hugged herself and looked down at her toes. "So now I'm doing all I can to get to the Froz... Forgotten Place."

Yosepha paused, eyed Mia for a moment, and continued pacing.

"That explains the direction you were heading," Livian said, and she tapped a hoof on the ground. "It's a good thing you told us. We'd planned to kill you if you refused to tell us the real reason you were heading to the Black Valley."

Well, gulp. But apparently Yosepha hadn't known that, because she turned and glared at Romakus with enough rage, the demon winced and put up his hands.

"Livian, you traitor," he said, earning a chuckle from the Zel look-alike. The other demons chuckled, too.

"The facts demand analysis," Yosepha said, and she flared her wings. "Be silent." Everyone shut up once again. The smaller demons might have looked up at the tetrads like they were the apex predators, and maybe role models, but they were directly afraid of angels. Afraid, or maybe respected

them? After what Noah, Azreal, and Shir did to Vinicius, she didn't blame them. Giant holy beams and colossal walls of light that could block Vin's fire? No demons were doing that.

"Mia is unmarked," Yosepha said, "and there are others like her. The council wants them dead. So does the rider, if he truly came to you to kill you, Mia, and you do not know him."

"Never met him before, or did anything." Except for touch a book written by Lucifer. Hopefully, that had nothing to do with it.

"But the woman, the rider's counterpart, saved you."

"Y-Yeah, she did. I asked if she could take me to the Forgotten Place herself, but she insisted the rider would track her down if she did that, and kill me. So, yeah. I'm trying to get to the Forgotten Place, which means..."

"Getting to False Gate first," Romakus said. "You think the war state will have the means to get across the red sea?"

"War state?"

Romakus shook his head. "False Gate is a mess, little soul. It hasn't been the same since the angels took down Belor. Something happened there after that, something involving the rider, and now we avoid it."

Oh god damn it. Why couldn't things just go smooth?

"Your plan," Yosepha said, "to journey across Hell to the False Gate, with this... creature, on your leash, is a courageous one."

Mia winced. "But...?"

"But foolish. The Black Valley will not make for easy crossing, for many reasons. Angel's Spine will be worse."

"Then, can..." Okay. Be brave. Just ask. "Can you... take me?"

"Take you?"

"Take me to the Forgotten Place. Fly me across the sea."

Yosepha shook her head. "While only a small scouting party discovered Vinicius yesterday, make no mistake, there are thousands of angels searching for the unmarked. Tens of thousands. If we took to the sky, they would spot would us in a matter of minutes."

"Tens of thousands? How many angels are there?"

Predictably, the angel didn't answer.

"And," Yosepha said, "I am not entirely convinced you should reach the Forgotten Place. I have no reason to trust the woman in aera armor. I have no reason to trust any of you."

Sighing, Mia rubbed her face and shook her head, too.

"I can't prove anything to you. So... what now?"

"Now," Romakus said, "the rest of us are going to have a chat. We'll decide whether or not to kill you."

Vinicius growled and stood up straight, but Mia gestured to settle down.

"They won't kill me," Mia said, "for the same reason Zel wouldn't kill me. I might be valuable."

"You might be," Livian said, "but Vinicius?"

"Aw, do we have to kill him?" Julisa asked. "I'd rather keep him around."

"Of course you would," Romakus said, rolling his eyes. He enjoyed doing that. "Either way, give me the leash, and leave us."

"W-What?" Mia clutched her necklace. "But—"

Romakus held out a hand to her. The playful look in his eyes was gone, and a dangerous demon with a dangerous grin was looking at her instead.

Mia looked up to Vin behind her. He didn't like the idea either, and he took a step toward the giant-but-much-smaller demon. Of course all that got him was every demon nearby stepping in, particularly Livian and Julisa, and the two demonesses grabbed him by his wrists.

"Don't!" Mia said, to the women and to her bodyguard. "Just... don't. He's wounded. He needs to heal."

"You are our prisoners," Yosepha said, "both of you. You will do as we order until we come to a decision. Give Romakus the leash, and depending on what we decide, it may be returned to you."

So much for them trusting her. Or was it, they didn't trust her to keep Vinicius in line once he was healed?

"You won't be able to make Vinicius do what you want with that leash," she said.

"No," Romakus said, "but he'll be hard pressed to stop us from killing him when we decide to. Now give us the leash."

She looked to Yosepha with pleading eyes, but the angel looked away. While the angel had some empathy, something in short supply from the demons, she would not stop Romakus, either. Mia looked back up at Vin, and the giant traded a quick glance with her before setting angry eyes on Romakus while practically ignoring the two four-armed ladies holding his wrists.

If he wanted, he could probably break free of them and fight. He'd rip open his wounds, bleed everywhere, get bitten and torn open by the other demons and get a bunch of new wounds, and then probably die. But he'd kill many of them before he went down.

And then he'd be dead, and Mia wouldn't have her bodyguard.

With a slow sigh, she slipped the chain off, and gently set it in Romakus's palm.

"Don't... hurt him, okay?"

Romakus raised a brow, glanced at Livian and Julisa, and then to Yosepha, as if they could explain Mia's behavior. Fucking demons didn't understand basic empathy!

She missed Adron.

Vin growled down at Mia. Upset. Well, fuck him. If this was what she had to do to keep him alive, then she would. Even if she shouldn't have, even if she shouldn't care, she would, and she did.

Yosepha glared up at Romakus and bat him in the chest with her wing.

"Do not use that unless absolutely necessary, Romakus."

"Aw, Mom, come on."

Yosepha rolled her eyes. They both did that a lot.

"I am serious. Mia will not be touched, and as much as I do not like it, this arrangement she has with the ragarin has kept her alive. Do not use the leash unless you have to." She aimed a wing, straight up at Vinicius. "And you, creature, are not to give us a reason to use it. It was an angel that killed Belor. Do not make this angel kill you." Again, every demon shut up quick, and more than a few of them backed up a little. Even Vin looked impressed. "Now, I will speak with Mia privately."

"Oh hell no," Romakus said. "That was not part of—"

Yosepha half turned with a stomp of the foot, and every demon simultaneously pulled back more as if an explosion had hit them in the face.

"I will speak to the unmarked. Alone. You may speak to Vinicius alone."

Romakus glared down at Yosepha, snarled, looked at the leash in his hand he wasn't allowed to use, and then up at the rumbling titan.

Yosepha didn't wait to find out what he'd do. She took Mia's wrist, and marched them out of the cavern. Not a single look back. She even flared her wings once before hooking them snug to her back, like some sort of smug 'stop me if you dare' gesture.

Eventually, she let go of Mia's wrist, but her stance didn't change from powerful, upright, stern, and all that imposing stuff. The fact Romakus had had his dick in her ass recently, and that Mia had seen it, didn't bother her at all. Or she just didn't let her embarrassment show.

"So, um, what'd you wanna talk about?"

"Wait." Yosepha nodded down at her before guiding them down another tunnel. Lots of remnants, screaming in their constant agony, grabbing and tearing at anything they could get their hands on, sometimes even each other. They covered the floor, the ceiling, the walls, everything.

Mia looked away from them. "I hate remnants."

"Hate? Why?"

"Hate's not the right word. I just... I feel so bad, but there's nothing I can do. It just, it really sucks, seeing them like that."

Yosepha looked down at her again, her expression softened, and the tiniest smile emerged, before she slipped an arm around Mia's waist, and hugged her to her side.

"Hold on."

"I—wha!"

The angel took off, and air blasted Mia in the face as Yosepha's gorgeous, enormous white wings spread and flapped. She didn't have to flap often. Each stroke of her wings summoned enough air the angel catapulted forward, and Mia squeaked and hugged her close. The cave walls and the remnants flew past, a blur she couldn't focus her eyes on, and their screams disappeared into the roar of air hitting Mia's ears.

A second later, it was over. Yosepha set her down, and Mia summoned her senses back enough to let go. Behind her, the tunnel went on for a good while, and the remnants were distant and quiet.

Wait. That wasn't just behind her. That was below her. Mia stared down the huge hole before looking back up at the angel, and unless she was going crazy, Yosepha was quick to wipe away a proud little smile.

“No demon is coming up here,” Yosepha said, “not easily. Demons can climb, and they can kill remnants, but doing both at the same time is not so easy.”

“I can imagine.”

“Now, come.” The angel gently unfurled a wing and gestured down the tunnel. It opened up into an alcove, and judging from the lack of remnants, either she’d been clearing them out, or chose the place because it lacked them. And it was a safe place to rest where demons wouldn’t get you.

If Mia could fly, finding a high place she could rest safely would be the first thing she looked for.

In the alcove, a big room with smooth walls, Mia sat down and pulled her knees up to her chest.

“So, um... yeah.”

Yosepha, face unreadable, slowly paced in front of Mia, wings settling snug to her back as she put a couple fingers to her chin.

“The Frozen Heart.”

“W-What?”

“That’s what you were about to call the Forgotten Place, before you caught yourself. The Frozen Heart. Where did you learn that name?”

“I... heard—”

“You did not hear it from a demon. The name has long been forgotten by their kind, lost to the annals of time since the barbarians are not interested in recording their history.”

It took effort to not make a comment about the things Mia had read. They were written in the ancient language, something no one could read. Maybe angels could? She’d have to ask, and asking that meant revealing yet another weird quirk about her.

“Zel—”

“Did not know that name. Even Belor did not know that name. It is a name no one has spoken in millions of years.”

“Millions?” Holy fuck.

“So tell me how you know that name.”

Shit shit shit. She didn’t think she’d have to make up a lie about this. None prepared.

“I... I... read it.”

“You... read it?”

Sighing, Mia hugged her knees to her chest tighter. “I can read the ancient language.” She squeezed her eyes shut, and waited to be smote.

“You can read the ancient tongue?”

“Yes.”

“Truly?”

“Y-Yes.”

Yosepha squatted down in front of her, and gently pulled Mia’s hands down from her face.

“Where did you read it?”

“In... In the book, at the bottom of the spire. It showed me a bunch of words, and runes and stuff, and—”

Yosepha’s eyes opened wide. “Runes as well?”

“Y-Yeah.” Telling her about the ancient language thing didn’t get her head cut off. Maybe she could tell the angel more? “And... And looking at you, I can see one of the runes in my head glowing, trying to get my attention. Potram?”

The angel’s eyes grew wider again. “You know... of the angel runes?”

Well, if there was something Mia knew that’d get her killed by Yosepha, it was this. Too late to not say it now. In for a penny, in for a will-probably-die-for-saying-this.

“Yeah. Potram, royam, and batlam. But, I don’t know what they mean. They’re in my head, them and other runes, too, put there by that book. I saw the names of the heavenly islands, and the original names for the nine spires.”

Yosepha resumed her pacing, eyes fixed on the ground in front of her. Hardcore think mode, like David had done a thousand times before.

“The spires each contain a book written by Lucifer. They are powerful artifacts, tools Lucifer created and then used to create the spires and the Old Ones.”

“Why? That sounds like an unnecessary step.”

“Because there is power in words. There is power in stories.” The angel watched Mia, face deadly serious. “What did the book show you? What did it choose to tell you?”

“It... told me about how Lucifer wanted to take over Heaven. It showed me the names for places, but it also showed me a bunch of runes. Hundreds. Thousands, maybe? I... I don't know what they mean, but they're in my head, floating around. Each time I look at you, the potram one glows. That's all I know.”

Sighing, Yosepha sat down in front of Mia, reached around with one of her giant wings, and gently pat Mia on the shoulder. Mia stared at her, waiting for the other shoe to drop, but the angel just sighed some more and shook her head.

“Be at ease. I'm not going to kill you. Or hurt you. You've convinced me it is not your intention to be a threat, despite the oddities of your body.”

Mia smiled. “People think I'm a threat?”

“Of course. That aura alone gives cause for concern. But now, I am afraid this knowledge is potentially a hundred times more serious, Mia.”

“But, why!?! I don't know anything! And even if I did, I don't want to do anything bad! If anything, I want to help.”

“And if the only way you could help was to die?”

That was a shitty, cheap argument, and Mia hated it, but it was also a very real possibility.

“If... If me being unmarked and stuff, if me just being alive, or in the afterlife or whatever, will, on its own, cause a big apocalypse or something, then I would let you kill me. If I had to, I'd kill myself.” Mia hugged herself as a cold shiver worked through her. “I don't want to do that. And I'm terrified I might have to, if angels are out to kill me. I mean, aren't you the good guys?”

Silence, with only the distant remnants to fill in the background noise. Yosepha's eyes fell, and she relaxed her sitting position until she was on her ass, knees apart and ankles crossed.

“Heaven cares for the souls worthy of her protection, and the rapholem, gabriem, and mikalim do all we can to continue that cycle. It is a cycle that has existed since God created us all, and it is a cycle angels cherish.”

“Cherish?”

Yosepha lifted her head and smiled. It was far warmer than any expression the deadly angel had made so far.

“You may have noticed demons are quite obsessed with souls. They not only consider them a source of food, but the greatest target of their desires.”



“I... have noticed that, yeah. Succubi and incubi are just, ridiculously hot, but any time a human is nearby, like a betrayer or whatnot, they’re the ones that get all the attention.”

“Yes, and it is the same with angels.”

“Eh?”

“Angels want nothing more than to protect and soothe the souls that come to Heaven, Mia. It is our God-given duty, and where we find contentment. The rapholem guard our walls. The gabriem tend to the souls within and insure their stay with us is as pleasant as possible until they choose to move on. And we mikalim stand ready to attack any threat that presents itself. But, even us mikalim, and the rapholem too, find joy in the presence of souls.”

Mia’s shivers melted away, and she lowered her knees from her chest.

“That sounds nice. Wait, when they choose to move on?”

“Indeed. Souls do not stay in Heaven for all eternity. You would eventually think of it as torture, given a billion years.”

“True! I was wondering about that. Vinicius was locked up for at least a couple centuries, but he’s still sane... for a demon. No human could go through that and keep their head on straight.”

“Correct. Demons and angels weather the flow of time differently than souls. And in Heaven, souls are given the time they need to heal and taste of its bliss. When they are satisfied, they rejoin the Great Tower of their own choosing.”

Mia sucked in a breath. “Rejoin? You mean, die? Like, suicide?”

Sighing, Yosepha shook her head and brushed Mia’s shoulder with a wing. The huge white feathers were soft.

“Only when a soul has decided they are now healed, content, and have nothing left to gain from the shelter and bliss Heaven provides, do they decide to move on. They step into the fountain, are baptized in its waters, and without pain or judgment, are dispersed into its welcoming embrace. Their resonance joins the flow, and angels may drink of it to sustain themselves. And the soul themselves, they are guided by the water to the Great Tower, where who they are, their memories, their emotions, their sense of self, all of it, merges into the center of all existence. Or so we are taught.”

“W... Wow.”

“It is a beautiful moment, and many souls and angels come to watch.” Nodding, Yosepha brushed Mia in the face with her wing tip, probably a little harder than she needed to. “This information is private, unmarked. Do not share it mindlessly.”

“I won’t! I won’t.”

“Good. I have told you nothing that can be used against us, but still, it is information best not shared.”

“Then... why share it?”

“Because, now that we have spoken with each other at length, I am... unable to deny that you seem to be a soul, Mia, the sort of soul that Heaven should have accepted into her embrace.”

Mia tried her best at a smile, and failed.

“Heaven didn’t like me.”

“Apparently not,” Yosepha said. “You are unusual, you and all the unmarked, but I will not ignore what my grace tells me. You are a soul, and while here in Hell there are usually no unmarked, you are as common in Heaven as grains of sand are upon the beaches of Earth.”

Mia tried to smile again. Success.

“That sounded lovely. Poetic.”

“Ha. I am a mikalim. If you wanted poetry, ask Galon. He would share a tale with you, or poem, or song, while making sure you climaxed a dozen times upon his length.”

Oh, damn. Mia gulped and squirmed a bit.

“Sex that common in Heaven?”

“As common as it is in Hell, if not more so.”

“Wow.”

“Is it a gabriem’s duty to tend to the souls, as I said. That includes intellectually, emotionally, and sexually. Whatever your heart’s desire, a gabriem can fulfill.”

Mia giggled. The sound almost shocked her.

“What if... a girl had a fantasy of being taken, roughly, all reluctant, a power fantasy and stuff? What if her fantasy was an angel swooping down and just fucking her where everyone can see? Doesn’t sound very... Heaven compatible.”

Yosepha rolled her eyes, but she laughed, too.

“It is not an uncommon fantasy, and something gabriem have long learned how to satisfy.”

“Damn. Heaven sounds awesome.”

“That it is.”

Mia scooted a little closer. “How’d you hook up with Romakus? I figured angels and demons killed each other on sight.”

Yosepha fluttered her wings slightly.

“That... is a long story. Needless to say, we did fight upon our first encounter. But once I realized he was part of the Damall, I let him speak. And from there, things...” It was the angel’s turn to squirm.

Mia scooted closer again. This was fun!

“He is really sexy, in that... scary killer kinda way so many Earth girls seem to be into.”

Groaning, Yosepha’s wings drooped, and she glared at the ground with exaggerated body language.

“He is that, as you saw. In Heaven, there is no shame in sex, or indulging in the strange things that sexually stimulate us. But, that does not mean it is smart to expose myself to such a deadly, manipulative creature.”

“Aw come on. Bad boys are like that.” She didn’t need her psych books to tell her about how hilariously hot and hilariously unhealthy those kinda relationships were. “I...” The potram rune glowed brighter in her mind the closer she got to the angel.

“Yes?”

“What is potram?”

Yosepha set her eyes on Mia, and let the silence draw out.

“You ask a lot of me, unmarked.”

“Yeah, I know. But... these runes, they’re driving me insane. They’re in here, in my head, making me crazy. I can’t make sense of them, can’t use them, and every so often they jump up at me and...” She pulled on her hair and twisted side to side. “David’s probably going insane, or already gone insane, getting teased with a puzzle like this.”

Yosepha looked at her straight in the eyes, face serious, and Mia did her best to keep eye contact. This was important. They'd already shared a lot of information with each other, Mia in particular, but that didn't mean the angel would toss her some potentially deadly secrets.

"Runes are powerful, Mia. Terribly powerful. Even potram, as innocent as it is, taps into and uses that power."

"But, what power? I don't understand."

"Angels can summon power with their grace, as demons summon power with their sin. But runes are different. They are gifts to the angels from God."

Oh shit. Mia froze, head to toe, eyes locked on Yosepha's, looking for any hint of exaggeration from the angel. Nothing but seriousness from her obsidian eyes.

"Gifts from God?"

"Yes. All the runes are from God himself. Ways in which those with the power can enact their will through the fabric of existence."

"Fabric... of existence... What?"

Yosepha smiled again. Thank god it was a friendly smile.

"Potram is one of the three runes given to angels alone. It is the rune we call upon when we are relaxed, social, and wish to display such."

"Wait, what? Relaxed? ... that's it? You're relaxed, and that needs a rune?"

"It does not require one, but it is one angels were gifted, so that we may devote our time to serving the souls of Heaven, without needing to manage ourselves." She gestured to herself, her jewelry, her clothes, her gold lipstick and mascara, all of it.

"That's a pretty useful rune for socializing, I guess. I mean, I didn't exactly go on a lot of dates when I was alive." Total: zero. "But, yeah. Men, too?"

"Of course. Women do not have a monopoly on beauty."

The few male angels she got to really see on the stairs to Heaven were, indeed, utterly gorgeous. And they'd have been even hotter wearing only partly see-through togas, with lots of muscles on display. And, given what Yosepha looked like naked, no pubic hair.

"So you're using potram now, and... that's why it's glowing brighter in my mind?"

“I can only surmise. That is not how the three runes react for us, but... the runes should only exist in the mind of angels. They were created for us alone. No demon or soul can use such runes, even if we tried to teach it to them.”

Yeah, well, there were a shitload more than the three angel runes in her skull. If she could just get at least one of them to click, that'd be at least one thing out of her mind.

“I'm pretty sure I'm not an angel.”

“Indeed. But, if you can see the runes, and know them, then... then that is knowledge I wish to confirm.” With a nod, Yosepha stood up and helped Mia do the same. “As much as it may backfire to give you knowledge and teach you how to use it, if I can learn what the unmarked are capable of, it may help with dealing with the others. Not all of them will have your disposition.”

“You mean, they might be mean?”

Yosepha nodded. “At the minimum. So, let us learn what we can about your abilities and uniqueness. You can create an aura, as angels and demons can, but it is not a direct aura. Direct auras, created by grace or sin, are like waves crashing against the walls of your mind. You can resist them. But your aura is like a spire's aura and how it affects demons, or the aura you felt on the stairs to the gate of Heaven.”

“Oh right! That aura was... wonderful. I felt wonderful.”

“Those auras are beyond my knowledge. They are auras of the world. To resist one would be like resisting existence itself. Angels cannot create those auras, and neither can demons. Heaven can. Her Heavenly Islands can. Hell can, and her nine spires can.”

“What about the archangels?”

“I... do not know.”

Mia winced. “Vinicius said the archangels are dead. Or at least, he said he's seen their corpses. What'd that mean?”

“That is a long story. But... it is true.”

Holy shit. “R-Really?”

Yosepha fluttered her wings. “An ancient tale, and one for another time. Let us focus on the task at hand. We know your aura is unusual, but similar to auras of the world. You read the ancient language spoken by the archangels, by God, and you have runes in your mind. The three angel runes, but what others?”

“Lots of others. I don’t know what they mean, but I can read them. Which is weird, right? There’s something to the runes, and I can see them, read them, but I can’t understand them! I saw the horde seal on Livian’s stomach, and how it connects to other runes, but I can’t activate them, use them, anything.”

After a slow breath, Yosepha touched her own chest.

“That is terrifying, Mia.”

“Terrifying?”

“No one has seen the power of those runes since Michael, Gabriel, and Raphael fought Lucifer and the Old Ones, millions upon millions of years ago, and Hell still suffers the scars.”

Gulp.

“I uh... don’t think I’ll be able to do anything like that.”

“I hope not. And the angels would not allow you to pursue such absurdities, regardless. So, we will see if you can at least learn potram.”

“But, how? I don’t—”

A gold light encompassed Yosepha, gentle and warm, and the angel’s wings spread wide as they glowed as well. Soft, inviting, Mia stared up and out at the glorious display, and the runes in her mind glowed brighter as she did. There was one in there for angel, servant of Heaven, and it glowed in response. The three runes angels used, potram, batlam, and royam, all glowed brighter as well, but potram blazed.

“I am wearing potram now, but also pushing my grace into it,” Yosepha said. “That is not normally needed. It takes but the tiniest trace of my grace to engage it, and wear it like a glove that fits perfectly. Royam is more difficult. Batlam is much more difficult. But let us see if you can engage potram.”

“Engage it? I don’t know how to do that. I don’t have any grace or sin to just... turn it on.” Sighing, Mia reached out and touched Yosepha’s silk, now glowing. “I—” Her eyes snapped open wide and her body froze as electricity shot through her. It was happening again, just like when she’d touched David.

Yosepha didn’t react. She tilted her head to the side and gently lowered her wings, but had no reaction. Didn’t she feel the electric tingles of something moving through them? Something in the angel shot up through Mia’s arm, flowed through her limbs, and tingled in her brain.

The potram rune in her mind flared, and the chains that connected it to other runes aligned. It was attached to existence, and angels, and beauty and peace and relaxation and sex and socialization and... and an angel's special grace. Mia didn't have grace. How could she use the rune? It was like trying to speak a language she didn't understand.

But, the fingers inside her knew. They stopped plucking the strings, reached out, and traced the lines of the rune. The invisible digits, guided by Yosepha's glowing light, flowed over the rune in ways that defied any sort of 3D space Mia could wrap her mind around. However it worked, it worked, and the rune came to life.

Mia stepped back with a squeak, and squeaked again. The rune awoke, blocked out her vision from inside her skull, and buried everything in a glowing light. Not a gold light, though. Some other color.

Red.

The light vanished, and something slipped into place in Mia's mind. Like wearing a glove in her head. The rune stayed there, awake and humming silently in her, like the strings that flowed through her. The rune latched onto something, like a balloon on a string, and it drained Mia of something, but with all the hurriedness of a tap with a tiny leak.

She could hold this rune forever.

"Mia."

Mia opened her eyes. She hadn't realized they'd been closed. Yosepha wasn't glowing anymore, and she looked at Mia with a raised eyebrow.

"I... whoa!" Holy shit. Was that clothes? Clothes! There were clothes on her body, clothes that fit, clothes that didn't fall off if she spun around too fast, clothes that... that were red.

The joy fell away, and she stared at the red silks that covered her body the same way they covered Yosepha's. A fitted toga sorta thing that covered her shoulders, and fit snug around her waist. The chest had plunging cleavage, all the way down past her navel, down so low her pubic hair would have been on display if she'd had any. The skirt was long, with several splits up to the hip, so every small step showed off her legs.

Black jewelry. Just as Yosepha wore gold bracelets, necklaces, and rings, so did Mia. It was a bitch without a mirror, so with exploring hands, she found a bracelet on each wrist, a few black rings with some very, very shiny amber stones, black sandals, a thin black necklace, an equally thin black

belly chain, a tiny navel stud piercing, and a couple tiny earrings that, as far as she could feel, were black chains.

A ginger girl, wearing red silk and black jewelry. A lot of black jewelry. If she'd had a mirror, it might as well have had 'villainess' painted across it in lipstick.

"I... I um..."

Yosepha frowned and folded her arms across her chest.

"You used the rune."

"I did, yeah, but I didn't know it'd..." She ran her fingers through her hair. Even her hair was smoother, like she'd spent some time with a comb. "Oh god, am I wearing black lipstick, too?"

"No. But that is black eyeliner and some mascara I see."

"Oh god oh god. I look like a fucking evil... sorceress, don't I?" She reached behind her. Awe, no wings, but her back was exposed. The toga was far more revealing than Yosepha's, and the angel's was plenty revealing as was.

"I admit, seeing you dressed like this does not fill me with confidence about trusting you." The angel walked around Mia, eyed her, occasionally touched her with the tip of a wing, and even touched her back with a finger. Mia almost jumped. "The three angel runes summon material from existence, using God's language, but the rune must fit you. Many gabriem with more sexual obsessions — most of them — summon potram with plenty of skin visible. But even they wouldn't be so exposed."

"It's... not that bad, is it?" Mia spun around and looked down at herself. No underwear, no bra. Only the snugness of the silk kept her small breasts covered, and even then, their inner contours were completely exposed. The tiniest hint of her areola were visible. And every step she took really did show off her legs, and now that she looked back, a bit of her ass cheeks, too.

"It is positively seductive. How sex obsessed are you, unmarked?"

"Hey! That's..." She threw up her hands. "Very, okay? Super very. I was a virgin who masturbated every night and bought every kind of vibrator and dildo I could afford and—"

Yosepha held up a hand.

"I believe you. My concern is, every demon who sees you wearing this is going to come to the same conclusion. That you are asking to be—"

"Hey! That is really fucked up. Just 'cause I'm dressed this way—"



Yosepha hit the whole top half of Mia's body with a wing. Thankfully, it was a gentle tap, and the soft feathers felt wonderful, but it shut Mia up and had her sputtering as some feathers hit her lips and got in her mouth mid word.

"Social and sexual dynamics from the surface do not apply here, Mia. Rules and ethics from the surface do not apply here. It is Hell, a Hell you have seen but a fraction of, and the pleasant side of that fraction at that. Rape and murder occur on a scale in these barren wastelands that make the surface look like a paradise. You have been protected from it by circumstance, by your lack of a mark, by Zel, and by Vinicius. Do not forget that."

Shit, she was right. Sighing, Mia looked down at her beautified self, and did another little twirl. Much as it was her damn right to wear whatever the fuck she wanted, Hell was Hell and it didn't have any rules except the bigger demons did as they pleased. Walking around with a sign over her head saying 'ooh I'm special and dressed all sexily, come fuck me' was a bad idea.

But for now, and maybe while with the Damall, she could keep it on.

"You're right, you're right. But hey, I used a rune! The uh, the thing inside me that's creating the aura, it's like... almost like sign language, done with fingers. Sometimes they're plucking strings inside me, creating the aura, but just now they touched the rune, and kinda signed it? And now the rune's glowing in my head, attached to me, like by a string that reaches into me."

"That is... not how angels use runes. We do not sign them with any sort of... inner fingers. We equip them in our minds, as a glove, like I said."

They both looked down and thought about it. This was beyond important, potentially world changing stuff, if the woman in aera armor was to be believed, but neither Mia nor Yosepha had any clue how to approach this.

"I wasn't able to use it until I touched you," Mia said. "Once I did that, while you were waving the rune around, it was like... like downloading the translation." Would an angel know the word downloading?

"I see." Apparently she would. "I have no idea what to say to that, Mia. You are no angel, or demon. But, you do not seem to be a soul, either."

"So... what do we do?"

"For now, let us see how you fare with the potram rune. Tomorrow, we can speak of runes again."

“Okay. Tomorrow.” Maybe tomorrow she’d tell Yosepha about other stuff. But, knowing that Mia actually collected sinful memories from the hearts she ate might be the final nail in the coffin, and drive Yosepha to kill her. Maybe better to keep that one secret. Maybe.

Fuck, she sucked at risk assessment.

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~~Day 38~~

~~David~~

The lava rivers sucked. If he’d still been wearing all the armor, he’d have died again from it. Even wearing only the leather skirt and the half breastplate, that was at least thirty pounds of gear. The dagger, something that’d probably been made for a satyr or gargoyle, was another fifteen pounds. Trekking dozens of kilometers with it was pain.

Caera took lead, arm mostly healed. Jes’s side was still a problem, and she held it as they walked. Daoka walked beside David in the back, and she giggled as she passed his dagger from hand to hand like it weighed as much as a baseball. Acelina walked behind them, hissing every so often as she held a wing out in front of her and checked the tears. The Las drifted around, never content to stay in formation, a couple around Caera and a couple around David for maybe five minutes before they changed positions. They each carried a piece of his disguise, unbothered by the weight, and happy to use the metal chunks as a bludgeoning weapon if need be.

A merry band of adventurers.

“This... sucks,” he said, wiping sweat from his forehead. Without the disguise, no need to give himself a fake number anymore. If and when they needed to do the fake disguise thing, they’d set it all up again.

“It’s not that hot,” Jes said.

“I’m going to die.”

“No, you’re not. Pussy.”

The most disturbed groan he could manage coursed through his body, and he glared at Jes as hard as he could. All that got him was laughter, from her, Dao, and Acelina. He looked back at the huge demoness and narrowed his eyes, but again, all that got him was more laughter. Which was great. Anything that made Acelina laugh struck a chord in him that made him smile, but he knew if he smiled at her, it'd spoil her fun, so he continued to groan and moan with exhaustion.

Daoka giggled at him, came in close, and hooked his arm over her shoulders.

“Don't baby him,” Jes said.

“I think I could stand to be babied a bit, especially since I'm gonna be the one to talk to the next group we find.”

“Armor?” Lasca asked. She jumped over to him, fluttered her wings a few times, and held up the two pieces she held that'd go on his legs. Each had to weigh ten pounds, no problem for a demon to wave around like batons, even a small one like an impa.

“Not yet, thank god.”

Lasca smiled up at him, even beamed with her big eyes, and darted back to the front of the group to walk with Caera.

“We should find myself some armor,” Acelina said, “if I am doomed to join this group on these suicide missions.”

“You're welcome to leave any time,” Jes said back at the spire mother.

“Angels behind us. Cainites with imbued weapons ahead of us. And still a long journey to the Grave Valley.” Sighing, Acelina shook her head and gestured out to the lava rivers around them. “No. I am stuck with you, until we can reach Azailia.”

“Armor makes sense,” David said. “I—what's that?”

Everyone stopped on a dime, snapped their gaze back to David, and looked where he was looking. He gestured out at one of the distant lava rivers.

The cavern was gigantic, probably a kilometer wide and longer still, with a dozen rivers of lava running its length. Amber veins were everywhere. On the walls, the ceiling, the ground under their feet, and they were huge and hot. No bloodgrip vine, but plenty of remnants coating the walls and ceiling too, roasting alive, but thankfully at a distance. Tens of thousands of them, so many their voices joined into a humming drone in the background.

But he wasn't looking at any of that. He pointed at a small dot in the distance up ahead, and squinted, scanning for movement. None.

"I know what that is," Caera said. "You'll see."

Caera motioned for them to follow, and they did, walking the winding path. Relentless heat buried David until his sweat drenched him, but they marched on, trusting that Caera knew the way through the maze. She got close to some lava paths, and the only reason David didn't catch fire from proximity was Hell and her weird rules. Lava was hot, but not Earth hot.

The thing in the distance grew limbs. A tail. Wings. The closer they got, the more the heat haze dispersed, and the features of the huge statue defined. Two legs. Horns.

Utterly fucking huge.

"What the fuck is that?" he asked once they were close enough. There was a lava river between them and the statue, but even separated by fifty feet, the statue looked colossal. Twelve feet tall, the female demon looked terrifying. Hot, but terrifying.

"A child of the Old Ones," Caera said. "A kalatara. You'll find statues for many of the different children down here."

"Kalatara. Fancy name. Which Old One?"

"Azazel."

"Oh shit... Like, the Azazel from—"

Caera shook her head. "The surface got the names of some of the Old Ones, but none of the context."

"Oh. Wait, what?" David came up to Caera, and stood beside her as they both admired the gorgeous, scary, naked statue. "How'd the surface get things like the names of stuff from down here?"

"Angels, I imagine. I don't know for sure, but a lot of demons think angels can reach the surface. Maybe they did." With a gentle swing of her enormous tail, Caera pat David on the leg, and motioned ahead.

"More!" Lara said and pointed out to the lava in the distance.

She was right. More statues appeared, dozens of them, each a towering behemoth that made Acelina look tiny. They came in a bunch of different shapes, some with four arms, some with two, some with wings, some with hooves, some with tails. All naked, but no dicks this time. The males had

demony faces as was typical, except even more... demony, with bigger jaws and skull-ish eye sockets and teeth. The ladies had mostly human-shaped eye sockets like Jes or Caera, but they had no noses at all, far as he could see from a distance, and their jaws were sharp and angular.

Their bodies looked like meera metal, but with the constant flow of the lava lighting them, it was hard to tell. Many were locked in physical combat, clawing at each other, biting or tearing or strangling.

“That Vinicius demon,” David said, “was one of these?”

“Yeah,” Jes said, and she approached one of the statues that stood in their path. Jes was almost seven feet tall, but she didn’t have to duck very low to get under their crotch. “The children of the Old Ones are all dead, far as I know. Only Zel’s bogeyman is alive.”

The other enormous statues were off to the side, with lava between them and David and the group, but the one statue in their path, locked in a half sprinting half leaping pose, had everyone stopping to stare. Some male species, big wings, thick raptorial feet, a tail. Basically a gorujin tetrad, from other statues he’d seen, but so much bigger, and with a crazy assortment of giant horns, and even a bit of a snout.

“An abdarin. A child of Abaddon,” Caera said. “Last one anyone knew of died hundreds of years ago, in False Gate.”

“Belor,” Acelina said, and a shiver worked through her wings.

“What happened here?” David asked, and he touched the statue’s closer knee. “You said a bunch of these statues are down here, but why?”

“I don’t know,” Caera said. “Whatever happened here happened... probably millions of years ago. If I had to guess, it happened after the First War. Lucifer gone, archangels dead, and all the Old Ones dead, too? Power struggle. The children wanted the spires for themselves and tore each other apart for them. They probably fought over Death’s Grip in this mountain.”

“Millions? Holy shit, how old is Vinicius?”

“No one knows,” Acelina said, joining them. “I doubt he knows, either. Time blurs for demons, when speaking in terms of millennia. But he might not be so old as these statues. Spires can still give birth to the children of the Old Ones.”

“They can?” Jes asked.

“They are terribly rare. Only one had ever been born in the thousand years I remember in the Death’s Grip spire. A child of Belial, as all born of Death’s Grip would be. But, Zelandariel had me kill him before he hatched.”

“Jesus,” David said. “Why?”

“The children of the Old Ones are extraordinarily powerful, and too risky to keep alive. As for Vinicius, she thought him a valuable trophy to deter other spires, and worthy of the risk. But she was never able to break him.”

“I hope he can keep Mia alive,” he said. “And... you know, doesn’t eat her.”

Acelina opened her mouth, but said nothing, eventually going back to the back of the group. Daoka followed her, and the two began quietly chirping and clicking. A private conversation, since no one translated for him.

The four Las, running on the same wavelength apparently, all jumped onto the gigantic statue, and cheered as they climbed to the top. They sat on his head, hung from his horns and wings, and giggled and pointed at each other as they adopted silly poses.

“Come on,” Caera said, “we’re out in the open. This heat haze won’t protect us for long.”

The Las sighed, but dropped as smoothly as squirrels and landed among the group, scattering. Lasca landed by David, grabbed his hand, and tugged on it in Caera’s direction, smiling big and bright with all her huge scary shark teeth on display.

“We’ll protect unmarked!” she said. “Right, Las?”

“Right!” the other three little creatures said, and they collapsed on David’s position. Lasca pulled him along, the other impa Laara behind him, while Laria and Latia took to his sides, marching in tandem and making quiet clop clop sounds with their hooves.

He looked back at Daoka with hopefully a very obvious ‘save me’ look on his face, but all that got was a giggle from the satyr and a tiny finger wave.

“David,” Caera said, not bothering to look behind her as they walked. “You experience memories when you eat hearts, right? The nasty memories.”

“Yeah. Why?”

She gestured out at the distant statues with her tail.

“Hell decorates herself based on big, powerful events, where souls, demons, and angels have died. Statues showing the powerful, ripping and tearing as they fight for control. She also decorates herself where demons like Valzanal indulged in torment, too. She remembers the horrible things. Specifically, the horrible things.”

“Y-Yeah... she... does.” Just like he did when eating a heart.

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~~Mia~~

Back in the big meeting room, with all the stalactites and stalagmites, distant remnants, and a couple dozen demons.

“Oh my,” Romakus said, and he looked Mia up and down as he licked his fangs. “Never have I ever.”

Mia smiled, quickly wiped it away, and frowned up at the huge demon. She frowned at all the other watching demons while she was at it, too. Except Vinicius. Still leaning on a huge stalagmite taller than he was, the titan did a double take, and his dragon eyes looked her up and down several times.

Okay, problem. Yosepha was right. Being naked in Hell was normal. Wearing a sexy dress, jewelry, and makeup was definitely not. And it'd only been a couple hours since the titan had had his tongue jammed so deep in Mia's body she'd thought she'd pop like a balloon. And she'd loved it.

Fuck.

“It is clear,” Yosepha said, and she gestured to Mia with a wing, while her other wing swept out toward all the observing demons in the cavern, “that Mia is special. The unmarked are special. You will all keep this secret from anyone not in the Damall, understood?”

“They will,” Julisa said, “if they want to keep their insides on their inside.” To seal the threat, the mini-Vinicius gave every demon a harsh glare, and she tapped some of her many claws together.

The demons all smiled and chuckled. They'd listen, but the threat hit them less like a threat, and more like a playful verbal joust. Demons doing demon things. Except, Julisa wasn't kidding, and they knew it.

“So how’d this happen?” Romakus asked, gesturing down at Mia.

“The how is not your concern,” Yosepha said.

“Not my concern? What happened to us being partners?”

“We are partners. But this is... unique. We can discuss it later, Romakus, but as for Mia’s new garb, it is best you leave it be.” Somehow, Yosepha kept her voice steady and strong, despite the big demon leaning in close to her until they were almost touching noses.

But after a few seconds of quiet, menacing staring, Romakus rolled his eyes, stood up straight, and gestured to Livian. The bolstara tetrad walked to Mia, hooves clopping quietly in the silence, and she handed Mia back the leash.

“You’re... giving this back to me?” Mia asked.

“We are,” Livian said. “Vinicius made some sound arguments that we should free him of the leash and let him go. He also convinced us the woman in aera armor didn’t lie to you, and that she said what you say she said. Naturally, we’re giving you back the leash, so Vinicius is forced to be your cute little lapdog, forced to do your bidding, forced to keep you alive.”

“Oh. Oh! So you’re... in the... keeping me alive camp?”

“Yes,” Romakus said. “The woman in aera armor, let’s call her... the mystery woman, we can’t just ignore what she did for you, and what she wants. So, much as Julisa would love to have Vinicius under her talons, we can’t throw away this opportunity. We want you alive, and as long as we can trust you, unmarked, we trust you to keep Vinicius on a close leash.” With a heavy growl, Romakus abandoned his psycho glare, and instead set his red eyes on Mia with the weight of an ocean. “And we can trust you, right?”

“I uh, I mean... I only have one goal. Well, two, I guess.”

“Two?” He tilted his head to the side, and growled again, directly into her face.

Vinicius growled louder. Scary as Romakus and his growls were, they didn’t make the entire floor vibrate, and the huge gorujin tetrad looked back at the child of Belial.

“Two,” Mia said. “I don’t wanna die. And I want to save lives.”

Something she’d said was hilarious because Romakus laughed. And laughed. And laughed. All the demons did.



“Lives?” he asked, and he spun around — twice — as he gestured around with his wings and arms. “This is Hell, unmarked! Who are you trying to save? Demons? Damned souls? Remnants?”

Everyone laughed harder, until it was a choir of nasty noises. Flash back to high school.

Fuck that.

Mia stomped her foot, and pointed up at Romakus.

“I’m trying to save everyone, you fucking dumbass!”

Everyone shut up and stared as Romakus slowly turned and looked at her.

“I—”

“I’m trying to save everyone! Every angel. Every demon. Every soul. Heaven. Hell. Earth. If something’s happening that threatens all that, threatens this whole Great Tower, then I’m going to do everything I can to save it!” She marched up to Romakus, reached up, and jammed a finger in his abs. Ow. “I’m no one. Nobody knew my name on the surface. I’m just some random girl. But for some reason, some crazy shit is happening, and apparently me and other unmarked need to rise up to the occasion and save everyone, and I’m going to fucking do that! So no, I’m not going to betray the Damall in some stupid bid to get power or whatever. I don’t want to do that. I just want to save everyone! That’s all!”

And because she knew her words weren’t enough, she punched Romakus in the leg as hard as she could. It took effort to not immediately scream in pain at her nearly broken hand, but she managed, and she glared up at him as she kept her hands in fists at her sides.

Romakus’s smile returned, tempered and controlled. After a few quiet seconds, he squatted down in front of her, and gestured to her with an open palm. It almost looked like he was offering an olive branch. Almost.

“You really don’t belong in Hell, do you?”

“No. I don’t.”

“We deal with souls all the time down here, unmarked. Many of us have dealt with tens, even hundreds of thousands of them. We’re not used to a soul actually giving a damn about anything other than their own skin.” He put his other hand to his chest in a very old-timey gesture of sincerity. “I apologize.” And, of course, he said it with an old-timey accent, like he was in a movie in the ‘50s.

Whether he was kidding or not, every demon gasped. Thinking back, had she ever actually heard a demon ever use the words ‘I’m sorry’ and whatnot? She couldn’t remember any. Apologizing was not something demons did.

“Thank you,” she said, earning some more quiet gasps from the demons. Another pair of words rarely used. “Just... yeah. I’m going to do everything I can to stop what the mystery woman said was going to happen. I don’t know what that is yet, but when I find out, I’ll stop it. And that’s it. I got no desire to hurt anyone, or world domination, or anything like that.” She slipped the leash back on and took a deep breath. Muscles she hadn’t realized she’d been clenching relaxed as the metal settled around her neck, like a warrior reunited with their sword.

“I’d rather we kept the leash,” Julisa said, “and for more reasons than just Vinicius is a tasty treat. What happens if someone else gets his leash?”

Mia joined her bodyguard, and smiled up at him before looking back out to the small crowd.

“Vin resisted Zel for centuries. I saw the kind of torture she used on him, and it included a lot of weird spire stuff. She tried to break him with mind-bending tools and stuff, and she couldn’t. You really think you could make him work for you just because you can hurt him?”

Julisa frowned, but Livian shook her head.

“No,” the Zel-look-alike said. “No, I suppose not. Though, you’ll have to convince us that Vinicius is actually willing to do as you request.”

Uh oh. Wincing, Mia looked up at her bodyguard, but Vinicius kept his eyes on the three tetrads, occasionally sneering; a subtle gesture on his short snout, but more than enough. The other demons took steps back and put boulders between them and the colossus.

“Vin, can you...” Please Vin, please please please do this. “Can you... pick me up and put me on your shoulder?”

Vin hesitated, but only for a second. With an annoyed grumble, he scooped her up, and she shivered as the demon set her on his shoulder. One of his spikes stuck up right along the crack of her ass, and she squirmed to make sure it didn’t penetrate her tail bone as she grabbed one of his horns. She smiled at his one visible eye from her perch, earning an eye roll from him, but he let her stay where she was.

“Vinicius,” she said, eyes on the rest of the demons, “is helping me of his own choosing. But I’m not an idiot. We all know he’s super dangerous.” And the big guy loved that everyone knew that, no

doubt. “The leash is to keep me safe from him in case... something happens, not to force him to do stuff for me.”

“Or to stop him from killing angels,” Romakus said. “Angels about to chop your head off.”

“That won’t happen again. I’ll do everything I can to avoid fighting angels, but if it happens, I won’t stop Vin.”

Yosepha glared up at Mia, but a few seconds of painful eye contact was enough to lower the angel’s eyes. She agreed with Mia. She didn’t want to, but she did.

“I think that’s enough for today,” Romakus said. “Yos and I have some things to talk about, and the princess”—he gestured to Vinicius—“needs his beauty sleep.”

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“I should kill them all,” Vinicius said, voice a quiet rumble. If alligators could whisper.

“We need their help.” Once Vinicius had sat down in their alcove, she climbed down his body and stood in front of him, between his legs. “Look at me. I’m wearing a rune!”

He tilted his head to the side.

“A rune,” she said. “Like, an angel rune. I’m wearing one! That’s where I got all this.” She gestured to her black jewelry and the red silk that did only a marginally better job of covering her bits than the last thing she’d worn had. “I mean... I think I’m wearing lipstick!” She pushed out her lips as far as she could, and went crosseyed staring down her nose. No luck. She pushed up on her top lip with her fingers, and exposed a sliver of the usually pink skin to her line of sight. “Red! I’m wearing red lipstick! Red-ish, anyway.” No figuring out the color without a mirror.

“And braids.”

“Braids? Am I?” She combed her hair again. Holy shit, he was right. Yosepha hadn’t said anything, but sure enough there were a few braids in Mia’s hair, in some sort of arrangement that left plenty of hair still untouched and flowing wavy. “Do I... look like a viking? I mean, with the red hair and freckles and stuff, and—”

Vinicius snorted, but said nothing.

“Right, probably not. But, still, this is awesome!” She spun around between his legs and posed, hands on her hips. “Any tattoos?”

He nodded. “On your back.”

“Oh! What is it? Yosepha didn’t tell me I had any.”

“I... don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“I do not. It’s a black line that runs down the center of your spine. There is a circle at the top, middle, and bottom.”

“Sounds... kinda basic. But basic can be great, too.” Nodding, she spun around a few more times. But, after a squeak, she stopped and pushed down the dangling fabrics of the skirt. Remember, no underwear. “I feel like I took a shower, and got dressed up for a sexy party or something.”

Vinicius snorted, annoyed, but it wasn’t long before he looked at her again.

“You’d fit right in with the vola of the Scar.”

“Oh? Why?” Of course an old demon like Vinicius would call the succubi and incubi by their old name. “What’s the Scar like? Why’s it called the Scar?”

“It is a great canyon, as long as the canyon that broke Death’s Grip.”

“Whoa.”

“It is a land of sex and music, and little else.”

“Sex and music. Sounds... like the ‘70s in the rock-and-roll days.” She didn’t wait to see if he’d say anything, no point. “That sounds like a strange way to run a province in Hell. I figured every state was like, always fighting or preparing to fight and stuff.”

“The Scar has its ways of protecting itself. Tarkissa is no fool.”

“Tarkissa? The ruler?”

Vin nodded. “A gorujin.”

“Someone like Romakus, then?”

“In more ways than one. Tarkissa is unpredictable.”

Mia paced, going back and forth toward the exit door and then back toward Vinicius until she was between his legs, eyes pointed down.

“David has to go through there, if he’s gonna try and get to False Gate, too. Is it safe?”

“Of course not.”

She frowned up at him, folded her arms across her chest, and tapped her foot. Her best mom glare.

He smiled. Subtle, and he got rid of it fast, but she saw it.

“As I said,” he continued, “the vola have run of the Scar. Tarkissa likes it that way. And volara and volarin prefer to manipulate, use lies, deceive, and fuck their way into power. If your brother is forced to deal with the demons of the Scar, it won’t be a battle of strength. It will be a battle of will and intelligence.”

“Oh. Damn. David’s a smart guy, but, I mean, if he’s got the aura issues I do, he’s got every girl within a kilometer fucking him. And... considering how the aura works, I don’t know if that’s a good thing. They might hurt him, or fight each other over him.” She laughed and shook her head. “Or, his greatest dream has come true, and he’s built himself a harem.”

Vinicius chuckled, a growly kinda laugh sound, but he regretted it immediately, and hissed as he looked down at his bad shoulder.

“Those angel weapons really fucked you up, didn’t they?” she asked.

“Of course.”

“I shouldn’t have let you fuck Julisa. That probably hurt you, right?”

“It did.”

She winced. “Sorry.”

He eyed her, head tilted slightly, before he released a long, quiet sigh.

“I enjoyed it.”

Oh thank god. She beamed up at him and spun around in place once more.

“That’s good, ‘cause, I mean, this aura thing I have is on a hair trigger. I know it’s going to happen again, and when it does, I’ll happily let you indulge in fucking any demoness that wants to fuck you back. Judging from how Julisa wanted to, I’m guessing a chance to fuck the big bad child of Belial everyone’s heard about is something most demons want to do.”

With his eyes still set on her, he leaned back, rested back against the cave wall as well as he could with all those back spikes, and his tail grew lax on the ground beside him. Twilight was coming.

“And if there are no other demons nearby?”

“Uh, then hopefully my aura isn’t freaking out.”

The tiniest smirk snuck onto his face.

“If all it took was a glance at a demon fucking his angel traitor to set you off so completely, it’s safe to assume your aura will be a problem in many circumstances.”

“Hey! That’s... okay, yes, I said it’s on a hair trigger. But I didn’t mean...” Fuck. “I mean—”

“The task will fall to you.”

Ah shit. She frowned up at him, but it didn’t last, and she turned and faced the ground between his ankles, her back to him. It was so easy for demons to be so blunt about their sexual desires. Sure, Mia was pretty comfortable with her sex drive, but that was with herself, behind closed doors. She’d never spoken to someone about it except her brother. But Vinicius, only five feet away from her, was straight-up telling her she’d have to handle his arousal personally if her aura triggered.

Vinicius, the demon who’d just jammed his tongue into her until she’d become a shaking mess. The demon—

She slapped herself, both hands, same time, and turned back to face the titan.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I don’t plan on trading sexual favors for your help, though, Vinicius. You’re helping me because you believe the mystery woman, right?”

He nodded, slowly, and licked a couple of his teeth as he looked her up and down.

“I’m going to get you one day.”

“Excuse me?”

He rumbled, deep and heavy, until the vibration tingled up her legs.

“One of these days, I’m going to get my hands on you when you do not have the leash to protect you. And I will take my sweet time fucking you until I am satisfied.” Another teeth lick. “Until you are satisfied.”

Mia gulped. “My aura—”

“I don’t need your aura to enjoy myself. And I look forward to having your delicious, little body squirming on my lengths.”

“I... I um...”

“You’re a beautiful creature, unmarked.” He leaned forward, and his huge head loomed over her until it was only inches from hers. “The thought of your tiny holes clenching on my girths as you climax excites me. It will happen some day.”

“N-No it won’t!”

He grinned at her, sat back, and closed his eyes.

Double fuck.