

~~David~~

Apparently, in the few minutes since David had left Diogo and the shark demon upstairs to fight the rider, a lot had happened. Diogo no longer had his left arm. Any of it. The rider — must have been the rider's axe, since the wound looked burned — had cut his arm off at the shoulder joint, so only a few inches of the limb remained. That didn't matter to Diogo. He roared down at the fallen rider and marched toward him, like he wasn't coming straight toward an ancient, deadly myth who'd disarmed him. Like he was going to win this fight.

No wonder Jeskura was terrified of this guy.

The rider stood back up, looked at Diogo, turned enough so he kept the brute at his side, and looked at Vinicius. The much, much bigger demon came closer, and entered the entrance hall of the dungeon, trapping the rider. Not really trapped, though, considering both demons were injured.

“Vinicius,” Diogo said. “Who released you?”

The dragon shrugged lightly and flicked his giant tail toward Mia at the other end of the dungeon.

Diogo snarled. “And where is Zelandariel?”

The four-armed monster said nothing.

“Where is Zel!? Did you kill her?”

The monster still said nothing. He didn't have time to. The rider had to pick a target before he got surrounded, and went with the one-armed brute right in front of him.

Diogo wasn't so easily taken down. Maybe he'd learned from getting his arm chopped off, because he sidestepped an oncoming downward axe damn fast, and again punched out with his only arm. The rider ducked under it, and his other axe came up. Diogo stepped back. Definitely a lesson learned.

The axe glowed red, and more fire flooded the hallway. The flames poured over Diogo, and the demon roared with rage and pain as ember waves buried him. He jumped back, and the arc of flame crashed into the ceiling of black metal before it exploded outward and poured down over the walls. Fire could not be aimed so easily. Fire went where it wanted, and that was everywhere.

“Vinicius!” Mia yelled. “Do—” She spun around.

Someone behind Mia, way behind her, opened a pair of black metal doors. With the fire blocking David's view, and Diogo, and the rider, and now Vinicius as the monster got up, David couldn't see who. Someone with a black face, tall, and spindly wings.

"Vinicius, get me to my brother!"

With an annoyed snarl, the four-armed giant turned around, and scooped up Mia hard and fast, zero attempt to be gentle. But with his bleeding arms, he hugged Mia to his chest, and covered most of her body with his. Demons could resist flames, but they weren't impervious to them. Even Vinicius had to be careful of the hotter spots, particularly the rider's axes.

And David could do nothing about it. As Diogo backed off from the rider, snarling and wiping flame from his skin, the rider turned back and faced Vinicius again. Vinicius's arms were all busy, though. Why was he listening to Mia? Why was he risking his life for her? And who the fuck was that demon way in the back hallway Mia was desperate to get away from?

Stuck between a rock and a hard place. Diogo was half a demon, and already on the backpedal as a fresh wave of fire threatened to burn his skin off. Vinicius needed to get past the rider and couldn't fight, but Mia somehow had the power to make him try anyway. The rider wasn't going to just let him run past, though.

David tightened his grip on his tiny broken sword, and—

Lost the tiny broken sword. Someone behind him yanked it out of his grip hard enough to almost dislocate his good shoulder, and David spun around with the sudden yank. Falling on his ass, again, and bruising his tailbone, again, he looked up at the fresh addition to the chaos.

It was the half burned demon. The huge vrat threw himself past Diogo and straight onto the rider's back, and wasted no time. His left hand grabbed the rider's helmet and pulled his head to the side, and his right hand came down and stabbed at the rider's neck. It hit something in there, something that wasn't metal.

"Adron! Get out of here!" Mia screamed, her eyes peeking up over one of Vinicius's hands. The heat haze wasn't enough to block out her wide eyes streaming with tears. Afraid for the demon apparently named Adron, or because she was currently going through an inferno?

The rider fell to a knee, but before David could jump for joy, the armored man got back up, with a broken sword sticking out of the side of his neck, up between helmet and shoulder. Whatever Adron had stabbed under the helmet hadn't done much, and the rider rotated an axe in hand, preparing to swing it backward at Adron.

Vinicius had other plans. He crashed into the rider hard, and knocked him and Adron over like a football lineman hitting a toddler. Adron went flying, and soon Diogo did too as Vinicius continued forward, each step vibrating the whole spire with the sudden momentum as he tackled everyone in front of him. The only thing that kept David from getting run over was his small size and pressing his body tight against the wall.

“Get Adron and my brother and close the door!” Mia’s voice, puncturing the roars of battle and fire, turned Vinicius around at the exit. He listened. For some reason, he listened, and grabbed Adron and David.

One hand for the sweating, panting Mia, one hand for David doing the same, one hand for the broken, exhausted vratorin, and one hand for the hole in his gut. Now that David was floating in the air in Vinicius’s grip, the hole in the giant monster’s stomach was visible, and blood trickled from it down over the demon’s leg. Holy shit, just one of his legs was as big as all of David, thicker and wider, too.

Once out on the inner balcony, Vinicius used his tail and slammed the two doors closed. And in one of the most iconic, perfect displays of sheer ridiculousness David had ever seen, the twelve-foot four-armed monster sat in front of the doors.

“This will not hold the rider for long,” he said. “He will summon his strength and open it eventually.”

“Hopefully after he’s finished Diogo off,” David said. “Can—”

Vinicius put the three of them down. Adron collapsed immediately, and Mia ran to his side.

“Adron! Oh god, are you okay? Oh god oh god. Vinicius, you fucking asshole! You almost killed him! I didn’t tell you to—David! Oh god, David!” Mia threw herself at him and hugged him. “You’re alive! I didn’t know if you were alive, and—”

They both froze, and the world flashed white. Images hit David hard, and his head reeled back as symbols crashed into him. They flared in his brain, redlike fire, amber like the veins of Hell, gold like the rays of Heaven, and they demanded he notice them. Somewhere in the dark matter of his brain, a piece of his brain told him he recognized the symbols, and once it did, his subconsciousness jumped on board and filled in the blanks.

Runes. Those were runes, like the ancient language he’d read for Caera. The same, but different. Runes his brain struggled to understand, struggled to pronounce even inside his own imagination. Life, death, creation, destruction, Heaven and its nine islands, Hell and its nine provinces, so many more. Three stuck out, loud and bright in his thoughts: potram, royam, and batlam.

He forced his eyes open and met Mia's. If his eyes were as wide as hers, he was probably scaring the shit out of her, too.

"I'm alive," he said. "I uh, came here to rescue you, but—"

She threw up her hands. "But we don't have time!" Her eyes screamed at him more than her voice. Whatever had happened when they'd touched each other, she'd seen it, too.

"I know! But we can't go back up and out, not with hundreds of demons coming down."

"Shit, I didn't think—"

He threw up his hands. "What the hell were those symbols!? We touched and suddenly I'm swimming in a new fucking language of shit I don't understand!"

"I know! I don't understand them either. But—"

He didn't get to interrupt her. Something big and heavy crashed into the doors with enough force to make the T-Rex sitting back against them shift a few inches across the floor.

"Holy shit," David said. "The rider is... is..."

Vinicius looked down at him, which he did even while sitting, and grumbled in his chest. David didn't speak alligator, but that was probably an annoyed grumble.

Mia grabbed his shoulders. "What do we do!? Think of a plan! Think!"

"I'm thinking!"

"You're panicking!"

"So are you!"

"I—Adron!" She got on her knees beside the demon and shook him by his unburned shoulder. "Oh god Adron I'm sorry! I told Vinicius to stop the rider, and he did that! And Hannah, and... and..."

"Hannah?" David asked. Mia snapped him a glare, and the one-eyed demon, barely conscious, aimed his one eye at David with enough malice to kill. Well, shit, don't mention Hannah.

"I warned you about him," Adron said, and he sat forward. Or tried, anyway. Mia pushed him back against the wall beside the closed doors.

"I know. I know and I'll make sure he doesn't do anything like that anymore. But let's get out of here. We need a way out! We need to find Kas, and get out."

"Kas?" David asked, and braced for some more eye knives. No eye knives this time, thank god.

“A sarkarin demon,” Mia said. “Big like that Diogo brute you just saw, but eyeless, two big horns on the sides of his head. Big tail.”

“Looks like a big shark dinosaur?”

“Y-Yeah. Did you—”

“Diogo and... and a sarkarin, were fighting the rider. The shark knew who you were and told me where to find you.”

Mia’s eyes shot upward. “He... He can’t be...”

“We don’t have time for this,” Adron said. This time he managed to get up, and pushed Mia away when she tried to stop him. “Once people realize Zel’s dead, they’ll start fighting for control of the spire. That means coming down here.” He gestured to the hole in the center of the balconies. “Even if they don’t find out yet, I can hear that fight above, same as you.” Despite one hand back against the wall to keep from falling, Adron found enough energy to half yell his words, half beg. “We’re going to get caught in the middle, and—”

“We have time for Kas!” Mia jammed a finger up at Adron. “He’s your friend! And Hannah...”

Adron shook his head. “We can’t—”

“Hold the door,” Vinicius said. “I will take my spire back, take its power, and you will be safe.”

“Okay, I just met you,” David said, gesturing to the giant monster, “but I trust you as far as I can throw you.”

“Same,” Mia said, clutching her strange necklace.

David continued. “There’s no way we’re just giving you control of the spire. Who knows what you’d use the horde call for.”

“And it’d probably free you of the leash,” Mia said. “And you burned Adron! You tried to kill him!”

David almost asked, but let it go. If a leash was how Mia was controlling the biggest, scariest demon David had ever seen, details could wait.

Vinicius shook his head. “The rider...” After a heavy rumble, he lowered his head. Exhausted, maybe, or not willing to explain. Stoic asshole behavior. “I must take control of the spire. It is mine.”

Mia marched up to the giant and stared up at him with eyes David had never seen. The fuck had happened to her in the week it’d been since he last saw her?

“You will not! We’re going upstairs to find Kas, and—”

David took her hand. Again, touching her skin was like an electric shock, and strange symbols shot through his mind, same as before. Mia was the source of them, but from the look in her eyes, she was seeing things come from him, too, or was getting stuck in some sort of feedback loop.

He let go, gasping.

“The fuck... is... that?”

“You tell me!” She grabbed him by his half breastplate and avoided skin contact as she shook it. “What have you been up to all this time? I thought you were dead, and—we’re getting distracted! We need a plan!” That was her panic voice. It sounded dangerously close to her ‘do what I tell you to’ voice, a voice only he ever usually got to hear. The joys of being a brother. “You always have a plan, David. What’s the plan!?”

“I uh... didn’t have a plan.”

“What!?”

“I saw the rider and his army attack the spire, and I just ran in! I left my girls behind, and—”

“Your girls!?”

“A few demons that have been helping me, but—”

He didn’t get to finish the sentence. Hell broke loose.

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Mia~~

Everything was going from bad, to worse, to worser to worst.

Hannah was dead. Adron was burned, badly, by her new slave. Vinicius, already wounded by Zel, was bleeding from new wounds in his arms, burned gashes from the rider’s weird axes, but not burned enough to stop the blood from dripping. Diogo and Acelina were trapped in the dungeon with the rider, which was actually a good thing, but short-lived if the heavy crashing against the double doors behind Vinicius really was the rider.

David was alive! David found her! David looked like shit, favoring his left shoulder and bleeding from a really nasty-looking nose. And he'd said he'd run into Kas fighting the rider. The rider was terrifying, the aura he emitted was terrifying, and he was chasing her, and David, like some Hell version of Jason or Michael Myers who could run instead of just walk everywhere. The chance Kas was alive was small.

But not none. He could still be alive, and she needed to know. There was no chance she was leaving Kas behind if he was alive, unless he didn't want to come.

Vinicius wanted control of the spire, but it was obvious he was a giant asshole. No way she'd let him have it. But how else could they get control of the situation? It was all chaos, and now they were stuck with no options.

David usually had a plan. Him not having a plan was enough to have her ready to panic, but she would not panic. The fact touching him seemed to summon the runes from the spire's book back to her mind was a new level of insanity she couldn't think about right now. Right now, what mattered was escaping.

Hell had different plans.

Mia, David, and Adron all fell hard as an earthquake ripped through the tower.

"What the fuck!?" David yelled and followed it with a yelp as he landed on his bad shoulder.

"David!" She tried to get to him, but the earthquake didn't so much as let her crawl on her hands and knees. Vibration ripped through her, heavy and chunky, and pulsed through the floor.

Adron. Poor Adron. He must have been in so much pain, from the burns and from aching to take out his anger on the rider and Vinicius, and able to do neither. And now the vibrations pouring through the tower had him grinding his teeth, biting back more pain from his ruined skin.

"What's going on?" she asked. "Did someone take over the spire?" Her voice barely made it over the rumbling.

"No," Vinicius said. "The ritual takes time, and drowns the spire in light."

Killing Zel had been unusually anticlimactic for multiple reasons, one of which was how the spire barely noticed except for opening the teeth doors and some other stuff. No giant explosion, earthquakes, or big light beams. And if the earthquake now had nothing to do with that, then what the fuck?

The world of Hell ripped itself apart. The parts of the spire's walls that were metal fought against the vibrations, but the parts of the tower that were flesh and bone couldn't resist. Giant white rib bones

that connected balcony to balcony snapped in half. Layers of muscle and tendon stretched and ripped apart. Blood poured from the walls, and the remnants cried out as the surfaces they grew from or were trapped within split open.

“W-What...” Mia dragged her butt across the balcony and sat beside Adron, and she grabbed his unburned hand. Both of them, backs to the wall, watched a new Hell open on them.

Blood rained over the balconies. Deep in the spire as Mia and the rest were, many of the floors above unleashed their death and agony over the metal as they ripped apart, and poured blood and guts down the center hole of the spire. More than just blood, but bodies, too, remnants and their soft flesh succumbing to the earthquake. A few remnants nearby were torn free from their walls by sheer vibration, and others were squashed by the walls of muscle shifting and flexing like real muscles trying to keep the spire together.

The muscles failed. Mia screamed and clutched Adron’s arm. The heavy thudding behind Vinicius stopped. The small fires and amber lights in the spire trembled, and drowned in new beams of light that cut through the shredding walls.

David fell. Already on his hands and knees, falling meant landing on his hip and bouncing around like a rubber ball on a subwoofer speaker. He drifted her way, and without thinking about it, she grabbed his hand.

Again, the strange sensation flooded her. Just like playing the weird instrument inside her, reading the ancient language, and thinking about those strange runes the tower’s book had put inside her, something in her brain, or maybe her soul, recognized the sensation. Communication? Exchanging information, or something else? The fingers inside her did more than pluck strings. They drew symbols in the dark matter in her skull, and sent them across the aether into David along the strings.

There was something there, inside her and her brother, or maybe beneath them, something they walked on or swam in. She had it, or could interact with it, and David could, too. And like one of them was negatively and the other positively charged, electricity flowed from her to him. Not as strong as the first time, but still, enough that she recognized the symbols their touch summoned to her mind each time.

“Mia,” he said, pulling his hand away, “maybe—”

The earthquake doubled. Mia tried to scream, but nothing came out. All she could do was hold on to Adron’s arm to keep from bouncing around, the much heavier demon her anchor. Vinicius would have been better, but he was ten feet away and she couldn’t even move two feet without getting tossed.



The new beams of light doubled in size as the walls continued to rip apart. Bone and flesh peeled away from metal and slowly revealed thick metal beams covered in enormous spikes hidden behind them. The metal skeleton of the spire.

Hell crumbled, and a third of the tower's flesh ripped away from its side like someone peeling a fingernail off the finger. The balconies remained, firmly attached to the skeleton of black metal beams and their serrated, enormous spikes, but the flesh and bone walls could not remain. The fire sky came in and bathed the spire's depths in light, and the bodies of demons rained on the growing canyon. Canyon?

The earthquake, or hellquake, only grew worse. Adron, Mia, David, and even Vinicius bounced and slid across the balcony as each new vibration that hit the spire felt like a bomb. She tried to hold on, but Adron's arm grew more slippery with every passing moment, until gravity and a hard thud into the metal balcony sent them flying apart.

"David! Adron!" Mia screamed. This didn't make any sense! Why was she sliding across the balcony like it was tipped over!?

Because it was tipped over. She screamed louder and pressed her fingertips against the balcony metal floor, but all they found was blood. Remnants screamed as they fell, and their soft bodies tumbled and fell apart as they rolled down the balcony toward her.

She was falling. The spire was tilted. Some part of her refused to accept that a spire as absurdly tall and as ridiculously deep as Death's Grip's spire could just... fall over. She turned her head and looked down at the oncoming outer edge of the tower. The wall wasn't there anymore, and if she kept sliding, she was going to fall between the metal columns of the spire's skeleton, and into the growing canyon.

A canyon. That's what her eyes told her it was. The wall of flesh that'd once been on the side of the tower was not only gone, it'd been pulled away, attached to the canyon wall that slowly pulled further and further away from the tower every moment. Strands of muscle still connected to the spire ripped apart as the canyon wall moved further, taking with it the fleshy spire wall and leaving behind the naked, spiky metal pillars and columns of one side of the spire's Hellish construction.

She slid closer and closer, and turned over onto her ass and dug her heels into the balcony, but they found no groove or friction to latch onto.

"Mia!"

Mia looked up. Adron had fallen toward the hole between the circular balconies, and held onto one of the chains dangling from the balcony above with his good arm. Vinicius did his best to keep his

back against the double doors of the dungeon, but the with the spire tilting on its side almost perpendicular to the doors, his weight eventually slipped out from under him. The lower of the two doors to the dungeon flung open, and two of Vinicius's hands reached up and grabbed it to keep from sliding down the balcony toward Mia. But neither of them had said her name.

Her brother had. David, wearing nothing but a silly, weird skirt thing, and a piece of black demon armor across half his chest that probably weighed a lot, slid down toward her. He made no effort to slow down, and half stood up on the slanted, bloody surface, borderline surfing down it.

“Mia!”

“David, what're you—” She sucked in a breath as the edge of the tower came up to her. Her hands flailed out to the sides, but the metal beams to her left and right were too far to reach. The spire's inner balcony floor came to an end, and gravity, apparently out to kill her, pulled her down into oblivion.

David's hand grabbed hers. David grabbed the metal beam just outside Mia's reach.

The scream of pain from her brother ripped her eyes away from the abyss waiting below. His right hand held hers, and she dangled over the newly opened canyon. His left hand held the side of the metal beam between some of its bloody spikes. David's left shoulder did not look good, and a new coating of blood came out of his nostrils as every muscle in his arms and chest flexed.

He was going to break. She had to grab something, anything, and get her weight off him before he couldn't hold on anymore, but something grabbed her eyes and demanded she look around.

Hell had been ripped open directly under the spire, a canyon that cut across as far as her eyes could see, in both directions, toward the center of Hell and toward its outer edge. A giant ravine that'd spread at least a few hundred feet across, and was only growing wider.

The spire, a colossal structure as deep as it was tall, black metal framework that held red flesh and white bone, was half falling half bending into the canyon that'd ripped open underneath it. The only reason it hadn't fallen into the abyss was the metal framework and the way it latched into one side of the ravine and hooked into the stone wall. The canyon wall that'd ripped away oozed and bled, and a few thick strands of sinew still connected the distant ravine wall to the spire, but they snapped as the ravine grew wider again. There were tunnels in the canyon walls, too, ones that'd once connected to the spire's depths, and sex demons and souls stood in them and stared down. Not across the canyon to the spire, but down.

Mia looked down.

Hell bled into the darkness. The spire, bending under its weight with half its body exposed, oozed blood and lava that spilled and ran down the canyon wall. Veins of lava in the opposite canyon wall poured down the stones as well. The crimson and glowing amber fluids fell into blackness.

The depths weren't black or dark because of shadow. The fire sky burned above, and lit the canyon walls all the way down, to where they eventually stopped. Hell had a bottom? Unless her eyes were lying to her, the canyon wall opposite of her didn't go down infinitely, but stopped, and exposed the blackness below. True, unending, real blackness. The amber, glowing lava poured upon the obsidian eternity beneath her, beneath Hell herself, and broke apart upon nothingness. The crimson liquid of the spire did the same, its fleshy growths and torn muscles bleeding onto the blackness below, only for the blood to hit something, break apart, and vanish.

She stared down into the endless eternity. It stared back up at her.

Demon roars tried to pull her vision away, but failed. As she looked into the black hole, shapes fell past her in her peripheral vision, dark red bodies wearing black armor, and a couple wearing gold. Their screams and roars of rage and frustration echoed through the canyon, and ended instantly when they reached the bottom. No, before they reached the blackness. At the edge of the canyon's floor, above the shifting, living darkness, the falling demons hit something else. They shattered like glass, and vanished, before reaching the void.

New vibrations flowed up through the canyon wall. The earlier hellquake had been from the canyon ripping Hell open, but had thankfully stopped for the moment. The new vibration didn't move her, shake her or the tower, or do anything she could feel. But she felt it nonetheless.

Something in the darkness below roared. No sound, but it was roaring. Something in the darkness moved, something she could not see.

Endlessness.

Nothingness.

She forced her eyes back up to David. Like her, he stared down into the emptiness that wanted to devour them.

“David!”

His eyes snapped back to her with a jolt.

“Jesus,” he said. “Je—holy fuck my arm!” He looked back up to his fucked up shoulder, back to her, and ground his teeth hard enough she almost heard his jaw click. “You got fat!”

“Oh fuck off and hold on!” She swung her other arm up and grabbed onto his wrist. He groaned and cursed, but nothing he hadn’t told her a thousand times before, and she summoned a grin for him as she helped him pull her up. They were both small and light, and that meant they’d forever be weaker than people bigger than them. But they were damn good at climbing.

The strange, electric flow continued to run between them, but didn’t blind her with a flood of sensation and information anymore. Whatever it was, it’d settled down to something ignorable.

She scaled up her brother’s arm, waist, good shoulder, and got her hands onto the metal beam that connected her balcony floor to the floor above. It was covered in huge jagged spikes, and the spikes were covered in torn bits of flesh where they’d once been covered in the spire’s muscle and bone wall. She got her hands around the curves of some spikes for a better grip, dangled from both hands, and looked down again.

The blackness looked at her.

There were stories about the things people saw in the ocean. It was one of the deepest, oldest fears humans had, right up there with the fear of spiders, snakes, and heights. Staring into the darkness of night was one thing. Staring into the endless depths of the ocean, straight down into blackness that defied understanding, while things in the dark stared back up, hidden enormous things, was the stuff legends were written about. Legends and horror stories.

There was something in the darkness below her, something that swam in shades of onyx and almost shining edges of obsidian. Whatever it was, its movement stirred the black waves, and countless, invisible eyes surrounding an eye the size of the universe stared up at her and her brother.

“The fuck is going on?” David asked.

It was David’s voice that ripped her eyes away from the void, this time. He was closer to the balcony, and with the whole spire bending and tilting almost forty-five degrees, he got his feet up and pressed to the balcony behind him. The tilt didn’t look so bad on the floors below them. It looked worse on the floors above, but at least the half of the spire that grew above ground had kept its walls. Only the lower half had lost its walls, all on one side, ripped away by the opposite ravine cliff face. The metal beams were literally bending.

If the spire lost its grip on the canyon wall they were on, it’d fall into the dark.

“I don’t know what’s going on!” she said. “Did the rider do something?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I killed Zel, that might have—”

“You killed Zel!?”

She glared at him, and slowly swung toward him and the balcony along the metal beam. If she thought of them as monkey bars, and not the bones of a flesh spire, or the only things keeping her from falling to her death, it wasn't so bad.

“She was going to torture me! And I don't think her death has anything to do with... with this!” She waved one of her feet below her at the pit. Best gesture she could manage with both hands busy. “Now help me get up!”

“The fuck are we going to do if we even can get back into the spire!? The—”

“David stop thinking and just go!”

“Go where!? We can't climb back up this slope!”

“I... I...”

Shit. He was right. Her brother pressed his feet up against the balcony slope, and tried to push himself up back onto it, but without an edge to get his feet on, he couldn't get up. He did manage to get a foot up long enough to pull himself up and straddle the metal beam, though.

Once settled, he reached out for her and helped her do the same. She had to sit higher on the beam, and slip her legs between some of its big spikes, but it was a shit load better than dangling off the edge of the spire, over a black hole.

She forced herself to look down and did her best to keep her eyes on the canyon wall and not the pit. The ravine that'd ripped open underneath the spire had taken at least a third of the spire's flesh walls right off the metal bones, where they now oozed blood from the other canyon wall, or literally fell off the canyon wall into the void below, joining the hundreds of remnants and demons that fell into oblivion.

Demons roared. Some stood in tunnels, either on her canyon wall or on the opposite one, tunnels that'd once been connected to the spire's guts. Most stood on the canyon edge high above, on both sides, and all of them stared down into the endless black. Whatever battle had been happening on the surface, it was over.

A familiar shape glided across the air from above, someone tall and curvy, with wings that struggled to hold her weight. A spire mother. Acelina? How the fuck? Either that wasn't Acelina and

one of the other spire mothers, or she'd survived the rider, climbed a few floors, and fell out of the tower like the rest of them almost had.

The zotiva glided toward the opposite canyon wall, ignoring the other demons and souls that fell from the tower to their deaths below. Definitely a zotiva, barely able to glide at all with her almost skeletal wings, but she managed to reach a tunnel entrance at the very bottom of the canyon wall. Any further and she'd have died.

The spire mother looked back at the tower, too far for Mia to read her obsidian face, and disappeared into the tunnel.

A glint of color drew Mia's eyes up. Someone else waited on the top of the canyon edge, opposite of the spire, someone in gold and bronze armor like the rider. Someone... slimmer than the rider?

"Mia!"

Adron's voice. Mia snapped her eyes up, and her stomach dropped.

The rider stood on the doors of the dungeon, literally. The huge metal door hung open, Vinicius dangled from it, and the rider stood on its edge with one foot, the other pressed to the sloped balcony. David's broken sword no longer stuck out of his neck.

How long had he been standing there, with the doors open? Maybe Acelina really had gotten out?

David shook his head, looking up at the rider. "There's no way he'll—"

If the rider ever gave a damn about Vinicius, someone he apparently knew, he didn't anymore. With a clear chance to sink his axes into Vinicius's claws and send the gigantic demon tumbling down toward Mia and David, he didn't take it. Maybe he thought it'd put Vinicius in his way of his true goal, because he ignored Vinicius, hooked one of his axes on his back, kept the other in hand, and jumped.

His metal boots hit the sloped balcony, and he slid down the bloodied metal surface like he was riding a surfboard.

"What the fuck!" Mia tightened her grip on the beam between her legs and backed away from the balcony as fast as she could. Not very fast. Sliding up forty-five degrees on a big metal beam covered in blood and giant spikes, to get higher and away from where the rider would land was borderline impossible. And David was below her.

The rider, body and helmet aimed straight at David, raised the axe.

"David, jump!" Mia reached down below her, half to David, half to the empty air beneath her.

David jumped. The fact he didn't pause and do some calculations was surprising. Her brother was not the sort of guy to just do something on the fly, no matter who told him to, but he listened to her this time. He looked petrified.

His hand wrapped around her wrist. Hers wrapped his. Her chest slammed into the beam as his weight pulled her down, and she groaned as she squeezed as hard as she could. Thank god her brother was a small guy.

David, dangling from her wrist, risked a quick peek down before looking back up at her with wide eyes.

“Mia, can—”

The loud clink of metal hitting metal vibrated through the beam. Behind her, the rider landed on the base of her metal beam, and his axe hit the metal where David had been at the same time. The sharp ping made her ears ring.

“Stop, please! Leave us alone!” She almost didn't bother saying anything. A random hellquake ripping a canyon open directly under the spire? The strange blackness below them that no shadow could explain or justify? It didn't even register to the rider. Whoever he was, he didn't give a shit about anything other than killing them. No point in begging.

The rider took one step up the black metal beam, and Hell ripped apart again. He fell back, and his back pressed against the slope of the balcony, the beam under his feet. Heavy vibration shook the tower, and Mia squeezed her dangling brother with all her might while her other arm held the metal beam and its bloody spikes until her knuckles ached.

The darkness below rumbled. She looked down, knowing full well she shouldn't have, and when the darkness again met her eyes, she tried to scream. Nothing came out, only silence, an empty voice lost under the roaring vibration of Hell crumbling, breaking, and tearing further apart. The canyon grew wider, and chunks of stone and flesh fell from the canyon walls and the spire alike from the trembling. More screams and roars fell past Mia, and she peeked around only long enough to confirm more demons fell from the tower into the abyss below. The same thing happened again. They fell and fell, a long plummet into darkness, until their bodies broke apart and vanished before reaching the thing waiting for them.

The darkness reached up. Invisible, but she could see it, limbs or tentacles or something, shimmering in the air, warping and bending her vision like heat would. Or like a black hole would. It struck out against the canyon walls, and Hell shook again. Whatever was beneath them was trying to rip

a hole open directly underneath Mia and David. Not the rider, not Vinicius, not the spire or the hundreds of demons around or anything. It was looking directly at her and her brother.

The rider pushed himself back to standing, fell forward toward Mia's beam, and grabbed one of spikes coming off its sides. Without a sound other than the clinking of metal, he climbed closer, and raised his axe high.

Mia looked up the balcony back toward the center of the tower. Adron wasn't there anymore. Did he fall out of the tower into the canyon? Did Kas? She sucked in a hard breath and looked down to David. He stared back up at her, eyes flicking between her and the rider.

The rider came closer. He refused to let the hellquake dislodge him. He climbed up the beam, one foot to a spike, hand grabbing a higher spike, and he brought down the axe.

Mia rolled off the beam.

The world froze again. Her stomach shot up into her throat. Realization cut through David's eyes like a knife.

"Mia!"

"David, I'm sorry! I..."

She held his hand. He held hers. They stared into each other's eyes as they fell toward the darkness below.

Just like last time, David hugged her and wrapped his arms around her. She hugged him back. In a couple of seconds, the speed of their falling turned the wind against their ears into a maelstrom, and cold shivers stabbed through her as the air grew harsh and cruel.

But she could feel her brother. That was a whole lot better than nothing. Dying with him a second time wasn't so bad, right? He—

Her stomach shot back down into her guts and almost out through her ass as the sudden fall turned into a sudden upward climb.

"What the—"

"Almost didn't jump in time!" A woman's voice. A demon woman's voice.

"Jes!" David, arms still wrapped around Mia, screamed in the most joyful voice she'd ever heard. "Jes, you fucking beautiful angel!" Whoever the demon Jes was, apparently David liked using cheesy lines on her.



“Shut up and let me work!”

Mia forced her face out of David’s chest and neck, and looked up. Gargoyle wings. Jes the gorgala had her hands’ claws hooked under David’s shoulders, and was straining hard to hold on as her wide wings fought against the air.

“I jumped down before you fell, the moment the rider came down to get you. Had to build up... some... fucking... speed!” Her throat flexed almost as much as her shoulders, and she veered them toward the canyon wall opposite of the spire. For a second, she’d taken them back up, using her built up speed on the way down to curve her momentum back upward. The pressure that must have put on her wings was insane.

It wasn’t long before she leveled out, though, and gravity got its claws in her again. Demons couldn’t fly, Mia knew that from what the others had told her. They could only glide, and Jes did her best to glide toward the canyon wall opposite from the spire and the rider.

“Thanks!” Mia yelled.

“I said shut up!”

Okay, the gargoyle woman was the angry sort. Mia could understand that. David probably appreciated that in a woman.

Mia hugged David as tight as she could to keep from falling, and he did the same, but his shoulder was a mess. It didn’t look dislocated, but she could see it flex oddly and the whole arm trembled under her. So she held on tight and looked around some more. Hell continued to rumble, and the demons on the edges of the canyon backed off as a few more rocks broke off the wall of stone. The rider remained where he was, half standing on the metal beam and half against the tilted balcony behind him.

The spire really had tipped over. With the opposite canyon wall having ripped away an enormous chunk of the flesh and white bone of the spire’s lower half, leaving the hidden metal framework of it exposed, the spire half collapsed under its own weight. It bent to the side, teetering over the canyon, bending like a branch and refusing to break. A weird building of metal, and literal flesh and bone that’d grown inside a hellscape of rock and deep rivers of lava.

Dozens of levels of the spire were below ground. The fleshy walls were bent and broken, compressed at the bottom where the tower’s weight half pressed into the canyon side. Another demon fell from one of the exposed inner balconies, and another. The rider watched on, ignoring all of it, helmet still pointed up at David and Mia.

A huge mass slid down the balcony behind and above the rider, dark red, with black spikes all over it. Vinicius.

“The fuck!?” Jes said, looking over her shoulder.

“Vinicius,” Mia said, and she clenched hard as she hugged David, and stared past him at the exposed side of the spire.

The rider and Vinicius knew each other, and whatever had happened between them hadn't been good. Enemies now, of some kind or another. He might have slid down the balcony because he was too injured and massive to hold his own weight along the blood-soaked surface. He might have slid down because he wanted the rider dead that much. Either way, Vinicius and his titanic form were more than big enough. He crashed into the rider's metal beam, and another beam almost ten feet away.

The rider whipped his head around in time to see the child of Belial's enormous tail smash into him. Four hands holding onto one pillar, legs pressed to the other, Vinicius roared with animal hunger, and maybe a little frustration, as the target of his anger fell into the depths.

The rider plummeted for a whole second. A flash of fire lit the darkness. Light could not penetrate the void below, but amber flames erupted from the rider and lit the walls of the trembling canyon. Mia did not blink. She watched, head turned and forced to look down over her shoulder below her, with the way David held her to his chest and with Jes holding his shoulders from behind. She watched, as enormous wings of black bone erupted from the rider's back, and wreathed themselves in flame.

The fire wings roared, loud enough to be heard over the rumbling canyon walls that continued to spread out. And the rider flew.

“Oh shit oh shit oh shit,” David said. He had a much easier time looking down than her, and his voice trembled. “He... He...”

He wasn't flying. The rider's giant black wings of red flame caught the air, same as the gargoyle demon holding David, unable to gain height. He glided across the canyon, and with speed Jes couldn't hope to match, crashed into the side of the canyon wall, the side Jes was gliding toward.

But he was nowhere near their position. In moments, he'd glided across a canyon hundreds of meters wide, and slammed into the stone wall hard enough the impact was like a gunshot echoing through mountains. Both axes on his back again, the rider's body pinned against the stone, his terrifying wings vanished in a puff of flame, and he began the climb.

“How!?” David yelled.

“I don’t know!” Mia yelled back.

Oh thank god he climbed slowly. Very slowly. For all his invincibility and power, he couldn’t climb for shit. No one should have been able to climb a cliff wall while covered in heavy gold armor, gauntlets included, but the rider managed. He climbed sideways as well, toward one of the tunnel holes in the cliff wall. On the same side of the canyon Mia, David, and Jes were currently flying toward, yes, but nowhere near them.

They’d escaped. Mia and David had a chance.

“Fuuuuuck you two are heavy together!” Jes roared, snarled, grumbled, and tossed out some curses Mia had heard other demons say. Things like ‘by Lilith’, ‘by Lucifer’, and ‘pile of bones’. But she also sounded perfectly happy being angry and using English curses. Or, Estian curses. What would a French person hear?

Jes had no chance of getting them back to the top of the canyon wall, but she hadn’t hesitated to aim them at the canyon wall opposite of the spire, even when they’d been closer to the spire. Maybe she had friends on this side? Whatever the reason, she aimed straight for it, and as they got closer, she aimed for one of the tunnels in the wall.

If the tunnel connected to whatever tunnel the rider was aiming for, Mia was going to cry.

Jes got them closer, and closer. And then not so closer. Her forward glide aimed more and more down, speed fell, and Mia squeaked as she looked down at the darkness again. Whatever waited there, its invisible gaze followed her and her brother. And unfortunately, Mia and David were getting closer to it by the second.

“We’re gonna hit the wall!” Jes yelled. “Hang on!”

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~David~~

Oh god, not again.

He didn’t know where to look. At the void below them and the invisible thing inside it that might as well have been the size of forever, or at the oncoming cliff wall about to flatten his already flattened

nose? It had some grooves, chunks, a few handholds he knew he could climb, assuming his arm didn't straight rip out of its socket. The problem was, they weren't starting the climb from the bottom. They were going to slam into it, and Mia was in his arms.

No choice.

Jes did her best. She really did. She got an arm out from under his shoulder, held his and Mia's weight with one hand, and crashed into the wall with her one free hand out in front of her. Her claws and talons found grooves in the giant sheer cliff face, and her descent came to a quick halt.

Unfortunately, her slamming into the wall with David dangling from one arm was more chaotic than two bikers playing chicken. David got his good arm around Mia and she let go of him with one arm so she could half dangle from his neck, half hug his side and face the wall, but it wasn't enough. They hit and hit hard, and a new wave of pain ran through his body as all of his weight and Mia's weight pulled on his bad shoulder.

He scrambled to get his feet onto the wall, on a rock, a stone, a non-existent root, anything, but the surface crumbled. Pebbles fell, rocks peeled and broke away under his toes, and he screamed with frustration as he did his best to hold on and failed.

Wait, he was holding on. He looked up.

Jes, latched to the wall by her claws, had one hand wrapped around his left wrist, while her wings flared and flapped like a bird, desperate to not fall down the glass window they'd just hit. Her tail flailed behind her, but he knew she couldn't lift anything with it. She might be able to climb up if David wasn't limiting her to one hand, maybe.

"Jes!"

"Fucking climb! Tell your fucking sister to climb!"

"We can't get a hold of anything like this!"

"Grow! Some fucking! Claws!" With a roar, she sank her talons deep against some rocks, until the scraping noise of their sharp tips fighting for a ledge sent painful chills through David's body.

"Mia," he said. "Can you—"

"I'm trying!"

Mia was in the same position he was. She had one hand free at least, but with one of her hands clenched around his wrist and her whole body dangling and half turning — ow — as she dangled from him, she couldn't get a grip on the wall, either.

David, hanging from the arm of one woman, and with his sister dangling from his other arm, could do absolutely fuck all. Every moment sent scalding pain down through his shoulder. His broken nose was an afterthought. All he could do was pour his focus into squeezing Jes's wrist, and doing the same for Mia.

He risked another peek down, past Mia, toward the void below. It was the invisible monster again, or something like it. Same feeling, same sensation, same nothingness that'd tried to kill him and nearly had with an avalanche. This time, it was using a canyon.

No, that couldn't be right. The thing that'd attacked him on the mountain had been huge, sure, at least as far as physics would guess considering the footprints it left. But not so big it could create a fucking canyon. A canyon that was getting bigger by the second as another earthquake, or hellquake, ripped through Death's Grip, and turned the wall Jes climbed into slippery ice.

Her claws slipped free.

"Jes, get out of here!" he yelled.

"Oh shut up!" She grabbed his wrist with both hands and flapped her wings for all they were worth. It was just like last time, Dao in his arms, the two of them falling to their deaths, and Jes doing everything she could to save them. At least no giant rocks fell on them.

But demons couldn't fly. They sank lower, and lower. No matter how hard she flapped, her wings refused to grab enough air, and the void grew closer.

He wanted to let go of her wrist. Something in his brain told him to let go, so maybe she could save herself, glide to one of the tunnel openings, anything. But the demon had her claws wrapped tight around his wrist, and every muscle in her body flexed as her big bat wings spread as wide as they could. Even as her wings blasted air down at David, the best Jes could manage after the collision with the wall, was slowing their descent.

"David, look!" Mia's voice.

"What? I—"

An amber maelstrom descended on them. Black wings of bone, wreathed in flame.

The rider. How did the rider get above them?

David squeezed Jes's wrist. "Jes, let go! Get to a tunnel!"

"I said shut—"

The speed was insane, the wings almost a blur of amber against Hell's fire sky. Maybe it was because of the rider's weight, all that gold bronze armor, but he came down from above and his giant wings did nothing to slow him. And once he got close to them, he spread his wings and crashed directly into them.

The impact was painless. Part of David's brain told him it'd hurt later, like the time he'd slipped on an ice slope and cracked the back of his head. In a few seconds, he'd be on the ground, groaning, maybe crying, from what was probably a bunch of busted ribs. Not yet, though.

More realizations kicked in. Jes had let him go. He'd let go of Mia. He snapped his eyes around. He couldn't see them. Oh god oh god oh god.

“What the fuck let me go you fucking sonuvabitch fucking I'll fucking send you to the fucking after-after you fucking—”

Oh thank god Jes was still alive. It was hard to see anything, with his face inches away from a set of giant burning black wings, his gut on the rider's shoulder, but he heard Jes's curses and roars punch through the noise like firecrackers.

“David!” Mia's voice. “David, can—”

“Be silent,” the rider said, and her voice cut through Jes's curses, the roaring vibration of the hellquakes, and the hissing wind hitting David's ears.

Wait. Her voice?

Whoever the gold-armored person was, they had much more air control than Jes had, and didn't have to fly across a canyon. The stranger had no trouble turning back to the nearby wall, and glided into one of the tunnel entrances.

She landed inside a tunnel, a small one only ten feet tall and wide, and landed with the same heavy clinks that'd warned David whenever the rider was moving. But, it couldn't be the rider. He'd heard the rider speak, and had seen the rider use fire wings to land on a much lower tunnel along the canyon wall, near the bottom before the ravine wall ended and opened up to the black void.

Whoever this woman was, she dumped David off her shoulder with a powerful shrug, and as he landed on his ass hard enough to bruise, the stranger dropped Jes and Mia. She'd held Mia by the wrist and Jes by her ankle before dropping them on the tunnel floor. Mia landed on her feet at least. Jes had been upside down, clawing at the woman's hand, and subsequently dropped on her back and wings.

With a snarl and hiss, Jes jumped away from the woman, grabbed Mia and David's wrists, and threw the two of them to the stone a few feet behind her as she flared her wings and faced the armored stranger again.

"What the fuck?" she said, snarling as she snapped her tail behind her.

Jes was a few inches shy of seven feet, and about as tall as the stranger before them. The rider had been a little taller than either of them, and on second, third, and fourth glance, this stranger was a little slimmer, too. Considering the woman's voice David had heard, and the sword sheath on her back and lack of axes...

"You're not the rider," David said, and pushed on the ground with his only good arm. Nope, that wasn't happening. Pain finally found him, flooded him, ripped the air out of his lungs, and he collapsed backward.

"David. Holy fucking shit, David." Mia got up, and helped him up with his good arm. "You look like shit. Dislocated?"

"It was. It's been yanked back into the socket... half a dozen times today." He knew he was going to be starving tomorrow. "You okay?"

"Yes I'm okay! You... you..." With tears in her eyes, Mia threw her arms around him. Never mind the gargoyle standing beside her she didn't know, or the stranger in gold armor who'd saved them, Mia wanted to hug him. He wanted to hug her back as tight as he could, but settled for a one-armed hug.

The pain in his chest told him it was going to get a million times worse soon, like a popcorn kernel about to explode. He gently pushed her away.

"Sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Yeah, yeah. I got kidnapped, made a few weird friends, and Zel, she—you! How did you survive?"

"Jes and her friend found me." He nodded back toward the gargoyle. "Caera, too. They've been keeping me alive."

"Caera, the tregeera? From Gorzen Eye?"

"Yeap."

"Oh thank god." She giggled and squeezed him again. Oh so much ow.

Hell, apparently, did not like hugs. The tunnel, the ground, the amber veins along the cave wall leaking lava down the sides of the ravine, all of it shook and threw Mia and David down on their knees again.

“David!” Jes yelled. “Get off your ass and—” The hellquake yanked the ground out from under Jes, too, and the only reason she didn’t immediately fall over was her flared wings.

She had a point, though. A woman who looked an awful lot like the rider stood before them, skull helmet pointed at them, and her black wings faded in a puff of red. The flames momentarily lit the tunnel far, a burst of fire, but it disappeared just as quickly, and the black bone wings within crumbled into tiny bits of ash. The gold-armored woman did not react, even as the soot of her wings fell around her boots.

Her aura was different, too. There was malice there, rage, but it wasn’t an overwhelming flood like the rider’s. And there was something underneath it, something that felt warm.

“You saved us,” Mia said. “Thanks. Um... who are you?”

“There weren’t supposed to be two of you.” As quiet and cold as the rider, the woman walked toward them. Jeskura stood her ground, but once the stranger got within clawing range, Jes didn’t claw her. Her tail drooped, and the stranger nudged her aside. “You saved them.”

“Fuck yes I did,” Jes said, summoning some rage and venom. It didn’t last. Her wings drooped and her eyes fell. “Got a problem with that?” Her fiery voice did not match her body language.

If not for the gold and bronze skull helmet, and the t-slit opening hiding the person’s face in thick shadow, David could have sworn the stranger smiled.

“It was good that you did.” Nodding, the stranger squatted down in front of Mia and David. The trembling ground didn’t phase her. “Siblings. Twins. Unexpected.”

“You know about the unmarked?” Mia asked.

“I do.”

“Yes! Finally,” David said. “Please, for the love of god tell us—”

“No.”

Heat drained from his body, from the tips of his fingers and toes straight to his heart.

“No?”

“No,” the stranger said. “If you want answers, journey to the Forgotten Place.”



“Are you fucking serious?” David and Mia said together. Jes chuckled.

“I am serious.” The stranger grabbed them both by a wrist, and picked them up, undeterred by the ground that continued to shake, and the heavy cracks of distant rocks shattering as the canyon grew wider. “There weren’t supposed to be siblings...”

“Supposed to be?” David asked.

“Supp—oh no!” Mia let out a tiny squeak and ran toward the tunnel exit.

The stranger did not stop her. She stared down at David, and left a long quiet pause where a sigh would have fit perfectly. No sigh, though, just silence filled with breaking stones and the distant roars of angry demons.

After a heavy gulp, David stepped around her and followed Mia to the edge of the tunnel.

“Oh shit, he’s still alive,” David said.

The colossal demon called Vinicius dangled from the canyon wall to the side of the spire, and his four hands and raptor feet dug at the stones even as blood dripped down his legs. And all his arms. The big demon was really fucked up, injured, and struggling.

He was trying to get away from the demons of the spire, apparently. Or maybe they’d shown up after, but at least a dozen demons hung off the edge of the balcony slope, dangling from the metal beams that’d once been covered in the spire’s flesh walls. The flesh and bone that’d used to make up the spire’s side had been ripped free on one side, leaving behind a metal, spiky framework covered in chunks of muscle. The spire was a strange structure, and the way it bent sideways while still being connected to the canyon wall along its lower half was just as strange, the whole structure bending like a branch. And along its lower half, wherever the flesh wall had been ripped off, demons swarmed.

Whatever had caused his current situation, Vinicius couldn’t go back. The demons, increasing and joining the chaos from the balconies above, hissed and roared. They were looking for blood, and it seemed to be Vinicius’s. The huge guy could probably take fifty demons in a fight without issue, but he was bleeding from half a dozen places. No one could climb up onto a ledge if a dozen people were there, waiting to stomp on your fingers. Or in this case, bite your face off. He had no choice but to keep climbing toward a tunnel and hope it was empty.

“He’s gonna fall!” Mia raised her tiny fists in front of her. “I don’t see Adron or Kas anywhere, though. I hope they’re okay.”

“Holy fucking shit,” Jes said, joining them. “Vinicius. So that’s what that fucker looks like.”

“I... I um... I freed him,” Mia said.

Jes spun around. “You what!?”

“I freed him! I had no choice. Zel got this leash on him, so I took the leash and killed Zel and—”

“You fucking what!?” Jes threw up both hands. “Zel’s dead!?”

“I didn’t have a choice! She was going to torture me, and—”

Another hellquake shook the canyon, and the three of them got to their knees immediately. Easier to not accidentally fall forward to their deaths in the void below when on all fours.

The void stared at them and reached out for them. Something hit the walls of the canyon and pushed them further apart, but that almost seemed incidental to what was actually happening. Whatever it was in the black nothingness, it was trying to get them, or get out from down below or something, and its focus pointed directly at him and Mia. How the fuck David knew that, he had no idea, but he knew, and looking down into the depths made it feel like a million people walking on his grave.

Hundreds of demons on the ravine wall, both high above David’s head and on the other side of the bottomless canyon, stared down into the darkness, or toward David and Mia, and the stranger in gold and bronze armor who’d just flown around with fire wings. They didn’t know what to do, either.

“You have the child of Belial on a spire leash?” the stranger asked.

The three of them turned as the stranger walked up to them.

“I do, yeah.” Mia touched her necklace. “I haven’t used it, but—”

“Listen to me, unmarked. If you see another unmarked, avoid them at all costs. Kill them if you must. You cannot risk this happening again.” The stranger shook her head, the closest thing to some sort of body language yet. “You’ve started this journey far later than the others, but you should at least know the goal. Reach the Forgotten Place, or we are all doomed.”

David and Mia, both still on their hands and knees on the edge of the tunnel, stared up at the stranger.

“Uh, seriously?” they asked together. Jes outright laughed, this time.

The stranger reached down, grabbed Mia by the wrist, and jumped off the tunnel into the canyon.

“Mia!” David got up halfway, and collapsed again as his bad arm gave out, and Hell slid the ground back and forth under him. He tumbled forward, and gravity sucked his stomach out from under him as he fell.

Sharp claws wrapped around his ankle and pulled him back into the tunnel.

“Stop trying to get yourself killed! Fucking christ!” Jes, on her hands and knees, glared down at him with angry, panicked eyes.

“Mia! She took Mia!”

Hell roared. The walls of stone trembled. More rocks fell from the new cliff faces, and shattered on the edge of nothingness below. None of it mattered. David, on his stomach and head sticking out over the edge, watched the person who’d saved their lives steal his sister, and plummet toward the void below.

The stranger’s wings reemerged in a small explosion of flame and caught the air hard. They spread as wide as a tetrad’s wings, and guided the stranger and his sister toward the other canyon wall. Just like when she’d crashed into David earlier, the stranger’s speed was immense. She was going to reach the opposite canyon wall.

“David! David!” Mia dangled from the stranger’s hand, squirming in the air. Every moment she grew further and further away, and her voice disappeared under the rumbling hellquake and roaring demons above.

“Mia! Jes, do something!”

“Fucking do what!? I can’t glide that far! I have no idea how she’s doing it but that’s borderline flying, David.”

And only angels could fly, according to Jes.

“Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck!” He slammed his good hand against the stone, but the hellquake and the vibrations that came and went in waves laughed at him. It roared and shook the ground underneath him, and his voice vanished underneath it all.

And then it stopped. The hellquake, the breaking stones, the shaking canyon walls that grew further and further apart, it all came to a sudden, sharp stop.

“The fuck?” Jes said as she stood back up.

David pushed himself back up to his hands and knees, but didn’t risk standing. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the stranger’s red flaming wings, and the now descending path they took toward the opposite canyon wall that’d grown even further away.

“I... I can’t believe...”

“I have no fucking idea what’s going on,” Jes said. “Was that the rider? Couldn’t be. They looked different. Felt different, too.”

“No, it wasn’t the rider. Someone else.”

“Someone else in aera armor, with fire wings!?”

“I... don’t know.” He sat back and watched the stranger glide off with his sister. Every moment the stranger grew lower and lower, not able to fly but still getting a ridiculous distance. “Will they make it?”

“Looks like.” Jes squatted down beside him at the edge of the tunnel, and watched, the only thing either of them could do.

She was right. The stranger got dangerously close to the void below, but she reached one of the tunnels on the other side of the canyon, near the spire. The tunnel Vinicius climbed toward.

“David...”

“She took her! She took my sister.”

“David—”

“We have to get over there!” He ignored the pain radiating from his nose, from his shoulder, the fucking agony from his ribs, and got back up. Hell wasn’t shaking anymore, so he risked getting to his feet, and pressed his good hand against the nearby tunnel wall. “If we climb to the top, we can glide over there, right? We can—”

“David! Just look, man. Look at that.” Jes stood beside him, and gestured out around at the canyon. “This thing has grown ridiculously huge. Even if I climbed to a nearby mountaintop and jumped, fifty fifty I don’t make it across. Carrying someone? Not gonna happen.”

“But—”

“It grew! The canyon grew! It fucking grew, and grew... until that bitch in the armor took Mia.”

“Until...”

Jes was right, on both accounts. The canyon had kept growing and growing, and was now so damn wide Mia was just a dot in the distance, standing next to a slightly bigger, gold and bronze dot. Vinicius was big enough he still had form, and slowly but surely he made his way along the canyon wall toward the tunnel.

“Think he’ll make it?” Jes asked.

“Now that the hellquake is over, I... I guess.” Energy gone, adrenaline gone, he collapsed back on his ass again. And of course that sent enough pain through him to almost blind him. It forced a little whimper out of him, too. Or maybe that was the crippling depression he felt course through him, like someone had dumped him in an ice bath and drowned him in it for good measure.

Trekking across Hell, running through a battlefield, facing the rider, none of it mattered. He’d failed.

“David, she—”

“She’s gone. I can’t get to her now.” He watched the distant canyon wall. Far as he could tell, the stranger and Mia stood in the tunnel and waited for Vinicius, so at least she was still alive. But... “She’s gone. I can’t... fucking... fix this. How the fuck am I going to fix this? I can’t—”

Jes grabbed him by his useless half breastplate and yanked him up to his feet. He almost screamed, but the rage in her eyes knocked the wind out of him.

“I risked my fucking life to save this puddle of weak shit? No! I risked my life to save the fucker who ran through a fucking battlefield with nothing but a tiny broken sword, and faced off against the fucking rider, to save his sister! Pull yourself together!”

That was a familiar speech. Maybe Jes liked war films.

“I—”

“Shut up, I’m not done! Hell’s been ripped open. That invisible thing that tried to kill us before is down there, in the black, and I don’t know what that means! Guaran-fucking-teed not even Caera will have the slightest idea what the fuck is going on. But that thing down there, that... nothingness, was trying to break Hell! Break Hell or break into it, I don’t fucking know. And it stopped trying when that bitch took your sister. And look! She didn’t kill her!” Jes, one hand holding David up, pointed out to the canyon. “She fucking helped!”

“Helped...”

“Yes, helped! She saved your lives when I couldn’t, because you and your sister are too fucking fat! Saved my life, too.” The rage melted from her eyes, and she stepped back as she let him go. “And she told you what to do. You’ve been going out of your mind trying to figure out what’s going on, right? Now, you have an idea, or at least know where to go to find out.”

He stepped back, too, put his back against the rock wall, and let the weight of all the shittiness drag his head down. But not all the way down.

“I have a goal.”

“Exactly, and while I’m not happy some bitch in gold armor yanked me out of the sky, I’m inclined to believe what she said.”

“About Hell being doomed if I don’t make it to the Forgotten Place?”

Jes opened her mouth, probably preparing for a sarcastic comment. But after a few seconds of silence, she sighed and nodded.

“Yeah. And that bitch asked about Mia’s leash before she took her. I’m guessing she’s going to make Vinicius help her.”

“That giant demon, on a leash? The fuck is a spire leash?”

“No idea. Valzanal used to fuck around with shit like that, torture methods using the spire’s powers. Zel had that fucker locked up for a long time, long as I can remember. So sure, it makes sense she got a leash on him. Mia has it now, so if I had to guess, your sister has a protector.”

“A protector.” David shivered and rubbed his chest and ribs. “He was fucking terrifying, Jes.”

“Then it’s a good thing she’s got the leash. And—Hey, he made it.”

Jes was right. Vinicius, gigantic even on the colossal wall of stone, got to the edge of the tunnel where Mia and the strange waited. And unless the distance was lying to David’s eyes, the stranger helped Vinicius up. Damn, she was strong.

He sucked in a deep, resetting breath and forced himself to nod. His sister was alive, she knew he was alive, and unless Jes was wrong, she had a powerful demon on a leash. Even better, she had the same goal he did: get to the Forgotten Place.

“Okay,” he said. “Okay. Mia’s okay. I’m okay. I—”

“You look like shit.” Jes came in close and examined his face. “Nose doesn’t need to be set, at least, but holy fuck you went through some shit in there.”

He smiled. “Thanks. For saving me and my sis.”

She pulled her head back and snarled.

“Daoka was throwing a fucking fit, watching shit from this side of the canyon. I couldn’t just let you fall. She’d never forgive me.” She squirmed a little as her eyes fell, and she flicked her tail on the floor a few times before gesturing down at the tunnel edge, and the thing waiting below. “Christ, what is that?”

“I don’t know. It has to be that thing that chased us earlier, but...”

“But this thing is... trying to... I don’t fucking know.” She looked left. She looked right. “Right to the fucking ends, I think. We could walk this canyon and all we’d do is reach the inner and outer edges of Hell. There’s no getting across.”

David mirrored her. Yeap, the canyon went from one end to the other, and again vertigo hit him as the part of his brain that looked for a horizon couldn’t find it. The colors blurred together, and red met black and stone in the far distance.

He didn’t bother asking if the sea in the center of Hell could run out of water. It couldn’t. The same way the stone they stood on couldn’t hover or float, but there it was, an empty blackness far far below them, waiting to devour them but unable because Hell floated above it. Jes and David both stared down into it for a while, and both of them shivered.

Black holes were scary, from a scientific perspective, but an existential one, too. Anyone who spent enough time learning about astrophysics eventually developed a deep fear of them, kinda like the fear many people had of deep ocean water. The same fear ran through him now, and cold shivers pulsed down his spine as he gazed into the endless black below. A black hole, except with no edges. An obsidian, endless ocean. A void. And something swam inside it.

Whatever was down there, it didn’t look back up at him anymore. It was still there, but couldn’t see him? Something had changed.

Mia wasn’t with him anymore. That’s what’d changed.

“There’s something down there,” he said. “There’s something... in that... nothingness. It wants me, and my sister.”

“Yeah.”

“Any idea wh—”

“Not a single fucking one.”

He sighed. Why the fuck were so many strange things happening to him?

Movement across the canyon grabbed his vision, and a tiny burst of quiet, high-pitched noise. He squinted and put his hands up to his ears.

Mia stood at the very edge of her tunnel, and some part of her was moving. Jumping up and down and waving, maybe? Shouting, too, but by the time the sound reached him it was a whisper, and buried under the noises of the demons above.

He jumped — holy fucking god ow — and waved with his good arm, but said nothing back. No point in adding to the confusion.

After a little while, Mia disappeared into the tunnel with the giant demon and the gold armored woman.

“Come on, we gotta figure out where this tunnel goes,” Jes said. “Gotta get up and find Dao and Caera. Climbing the canyon wall would be too risky.”

“You don’t know the tunnel?”

“There aren’t too many tunnels near the spire, except for the hatching pit tunnels. This isn’t one of them, but—holy fuck I just realized the hatching pit tunnels might be exposed. Oh fucking god if those little fuckers can scale the canyon wall, Death’s Grip is going to turn into a shit show real fast.” She threw up her hands. “Fuck. Maybe the spire can repair Death’s Grip?”

“Repair a canyon that looks thousands of kilometers long?” Maybe tens of thousands.

“Maybe. I fucking hope so.”

~~~~~

~~~~~

~~Mia~~

“Let me go! Let me go!”

The gold stranger let her go, and Mia collapsed on her ass when her ankles hit the stone.

Groaning, Mia got back up, and looked back to the canyon. Oh god, it’d grown so huge. So ridiculously, utterly huge. The void below waited, no longer ripping Hell apart, but the damage had been done. And this bitch beside her had put her on the wrong side!

“How the fuck am I supposed to get back to my brother now?”

“You’re not. You saw what happened.” The stranger gestured to the canyon. Despite how scary she looked, especially with her black bone wings all covered in flame poofing out of existence and crumbling into soot, the woman sounded perfectly normal. Almost boringly normal.



“You can’t believe David and I…” With a heavy sigh, Mia leaned against the tunnel wall, and stared out across the canyon to the two dots in the distance. David, and his demon friend Jes, stood in their tunnel entrance, same as Mia, and didn’t go anywhere.

It was so far. So close, and so damn far.

“We are safe for now,” the stranger said, and she stepped up to the edge of the tunnel. “Vinicius, faster!” Even the way she raised her voice was hollow, completely at odds with the burning cold of her aura. Murder was the only word Mia could find to describe it. Murder, and something underneath it the rider didn’t have, something subtle, but warm, and almost inviting.

“Vinicius knew you were coming?”

“No.”

“Then, uh, what makes you think—”

The stranger reached around and down the edge of the tunnel, and grabbed hold of Vinicius. Mia, eyes locked on her brother, squeaked and jumped back as the gold and bronze woman yanked the giant demon up into the tunnel with them. Vinicius helped her, claws digging into the stone as he pulled himself up, but there was no doubt the woman, tiny compared to the titan, helped. More than helped. She got a hand on one of the massive horns on the demon’s head, another around an elbow spike, and pulled him forward hard enough he hit the tunnel ground hard.

Grumbling, Vinicius brought himself to his feet, set a hand against the hole in his stomach, and glared down at the stranger.

“You,” he said.

“Me.”

“The rider—”

“Followed me here.”

Vinicius rumbled in his throat, clicked once, and set his dragon gaze on Mia.

“And you came because you heard some unmarked had arrived?” he asked the stranger, angry gaze still on Mia.

The stranger didn’t answer. She set a hand on her hip and tilted her head up at Vinicius as she stood in front of him a whole two feet away. She looked a few inches shy of seven feet, very tall for a woman, but her head reached Vinicius’s crotch and no higher. Fearless.

“Mia,” the stranger said, “your leash will work until a spire ruler deactivates it.”

Mia set a hand on the warm, amber stone on her chain necklace.

“A spire ruler? Any will do?”

“Yes. Spires tap into the power of Hell, and focus it, but it is Hell’s power that fuels the leash.”

The stranger kept her skull helmet pointed at the demon and did not move an inch, not even to shift her weight. “A sliver of that power rests within the stone. It is no horde call, and will not wear with time.”

“Unless...”

“Unless a spire ruler deactivates it, or the necklace is destroyed.” The stranger reached out and poked Vinicius in the stomach. “How pitiful, that a child of Belial was bound by a single, ambitious tetrad and a simple spire leash.”

Vinicius growled and his muscles flexed, ready to strike the stranger. But he didn’t.

“The leash will stop him from attacking you, unmarked,” the stranger continued. “And it will prevent this beast from going too far of his own will. You cannot command him to do your bidding, but you can inflict pain whenever you wish.”

“Zel showed me the pain part. I... didn’t like that.”

The stranger turned her skull helmet and aimed it directly down at Mia. How could Mia not see her face in the t-slit opening of the helmet? There should have been enough light.

“Do not pity this monster. He has killed as many as the rider. Use him, until your goal is met.”

“My goal?”

“The Forgotten Place. You must go there.”

Mia folded her arms across her chest. “I’m not going anywhere without—”

“Enough.” The stranger turned the rest of her body to face her, and Mia promptly took several steps back. “You will either journey to the Forgotten Place, or you will die. You must avoid the other unmarked, or kill them if they try to kill you and steal your knowledge.”

“Kill? Steal knowledge? What?”

“I have said enough. Now go.”

“You’re... not going to tell me about why I’m unmarked? Why I have this aura thing? Why I saw things when I ate a demon heart? Why I can read the ancient language? Why... Why I saw things when

I... touched Lucifer's book, in the spire basement?" Might as well pour out her secrets. If there was anyone around who might actually answer her questions, the stranger was—

"No."

Fuck! Fucking god, this woman. Mia could roll with not knowing everything, if she had to. But David would have exploded and eventually taken a swing at her, and probably get his arm cut off for trying. The stranger had a really big sword sheath.

Sighing, Mia let her head droop, before she looked back out to the canyon. David and Jes stood in their tunnel, waiting. At least the stranger had told David where to go, too.

Mia jumped up and down a few times and waved an arm.

"David! Forgotten Place!"

She might as well have been yelling into the void. She kinda was, considering what lurked beneath. Her voice couldn't reach him, at least not as words. He didn't yell anything back, but he jumped and waved back at her a few times. Okay, good, some communication.

Mia spun around to the sound of metal clinking. The stranger was walking away.

"Wait!"

The stranger stopped, but didn't look back.

"You have your mission."

"I know! I know, and I'll go. I'll go because... because what else can I do? But why aren't you helping?"

"The rider will follow me, as he followed me here. He will kill you if he can. Stealth is your only option."

"But he's on the other side of the canyon, and—"

"He will find a way across, if he believes I am helping an unmarked."

Oh, fuck.

"Okay. Okay..." Deep, resetting breaths. "Before you go, did you see a burned vratorin fall? Burned on one half of his body, by this... asshole!" She gestured up at Vinicius. "And um, did you see a sarkarin? One of those shark dinosaurs."

"I know what a sarkarin is."

“Right, of course you do.” Gulp. “Did you see one fall?”

“I did not.”

Mia sighed relief. There was still a good chance they’d died, but maybe they hadn’t.

That zotiva though, the spire mother, had that really been Acelina? The rider had opened the door, and who knew how long he’d stood there, assessing the situation while Mia and David did their best to not fall to their deaths. If that were Acelina, and she was on the other side of the canyon now, she might run into David, and... and kill him. But why would the rider let her live?

The stranger disappeared into the darkness, and the clink of her metal armor vanished a moment later.

“Uh...”

“I do not know how she and the rider get around so quickly,” Vinicius said. “They are thorns in my side.”

“Oh. You don’t like them?”

The four-armed demon growled deep in his throat and clicked a few times, heavy cluck sounds that each made his neck bulge slightly. He used the back of his tongue to hit his throat in a way she couldn’t.

“I do not.” And, of course, he offered no explanation.

Well, this was going to be a wonderful partnership.

She dusted herself off, waved one more time back at her brother, and followed the rider into the tunnel.

“So, Vinicius. Any idea what she was talking about? On the other canyon wall, she said David and I had to get to the Forgotten Place or we were all doomed.”

That got some surprise out of him. He froze and stared down at her, and she managed to meet his gaze for a few seconds before looking away. He was intense.

“No, but... she rarely speaks lightly.”

Double gulp.

Vinicius’s half dragon, half demony face, with its short-ish dragon snout, was scary, but not ugly. And terrifying as it was being so near him, the stranger seemed to trust the leash Mia had, and considering Zel’s demonstration, the leash worked. Mia was happier not testing it to confirm.

Her new pet, or slave, or however she should think of him, was one of the deadliest demons around, and her best bet at actually reaching the Forgotten Place and meeting David again. Lucky, sorta.

She peeked down over the tunnel edge, down at the nothingness, quivered from head to toe, and forced herself to look into the tunnel behind her.

“Alright, let’s see if this tunnel gets us back to the surface,” she said, and started walking. “And we need to get you something to eat.”

“Something to eat?” he asked. Hearing someone with a deep, gravelly voice like that, and a tiny hint of a serpent’s hiss in there too, sound shocked and confused, was enough to make Mia smile.

“Uh, yeah? You’re injured. Very injured. Breathing fire — and nearly killing my friend, you dick — and fighting the rider, I imagine Zel’s heart isn’t enough food for you, considering Zel left you starving all the time.”

After a long pause and a heavy growl, Vinicius eventually nodded.

“True.”

“And besides, I need your help to make sure Kas and Adron are still alive. The Forgotten Place can wait.”

Vinicius grumbled, but said nothing.

Mia forced herself to smile, but a memory ripped it off her face hard enough she almost fell. Hannah. Mia gulped down a boulder, looked down, and kept walking as Hannah’s dying eyes seared themselves into her mind.