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

"Caera, the tegeera? 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. *(w)wW.N.v(ε)Łw©Rm.c.εⓂ*

"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 *(w)w.N.v(ε)Łw©Rm.c.εⓂ*

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--" *(w)w.N.v(ε)Łw©Rm.c.εⓂ*

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. *(w)wW.©o©éŁw©Rm.c.εⓂ*

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.