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"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!"