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Caera, the voice of reason in their party, shook her head as she stood back up.

"We know you're thankful, David. But it's not like we're helping you for no reason."

Dao chirped, pushed Jes off him, stood behind him and hugged him instead.

"Okay," the tiger lady said, rolling her eyes, "at least Jes and I aren't helping you for no reason. Dao wants to keep you as a pet, fine, but I expect compensation. You're going to help me kill those Cainite fucks." Nodding, the tiger lady grabbed the sword hilt he'd tossed, and handed it to him. It was better than nothing, at least.

"Still not really sure how you expect me to do that," he said. "You just said you don't expect me to be fighting."

"Of course not. You'll be bait."

He winced. Lovely.

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Dao and Jes were healed enough to walk, but not run. That meant stealth. He'd have preferred they stayed behind, and Caera had said the same thing, but Jes insisted, and her personal goal -- killing Diogo -- was on the top of the priority list. They had to see the spire.

Saw it they did.

"Holy shit," David said. The girls crouched behind the rock with him, all four hiding near the base of the mountain. Behind the mountain was their little hideout, and they'd had to climb up a ways to get up to where the ground spread out, the valley opened up, and the great spire became visible.

The spire was a towering behemoth of claws, stone and flesh, with giant balconies that circled it at different levels, each lined with colossal teeth. Hundreds, thousands of feet tall. Imps circled the air, gliding, flowing, along with some gargoyles and some bat-like demon women. Dilojas, according to the girls. The bigger breeds walked the ground, vrats, brutes, tigers, plenty of the gliders too, though the imps and grems preferred to hop and glide from giant spike to giant spike that stuck out of the ground.

That was a lot of corpses and skeletons on those spikes.

"Fucking terrifying," David whispered.

"Zel's a scary bitch," Jes said.

Dao clicked twice.

Caera shook her head. "Better her than letting shit get nasty like in False Gate."

"And Mia's in there?" he asked.

Caera nodded. "The demons are buzzing. Excited. Something's up, and a good bet it's Mia. No one's seen an unmarked soul before, let alone one with an aura."

"And that," Jes said, pointing out into the valley and a tall-as-fuck brute standing at the spire's entrance, "is fucking Diogo."

"That's Diogo!?" David slapped his hand over his mouth, and hid behind the rock again. They all did. Too loud. "Shit, that's Diogo? He's huge!"

Jes nodded, growling quietly as she peeked over the rock again. "Like I said, he became a bailliff because he's bigger than other brutes, and just barely smart enough to not get stabbed in the back."

"I could go in there," Caera said. "He doesn't know I'm with you guys. Unless someone's come running from Gorzen Eye to tell them I'm missing, I could walk in there and... convince Diogo to come out?"

"How the fuck you going to do that?" Jes asked. "He's just delivered an unmarked soul to Zel. She's probably rewarding him. Free food, lots of sex, the works."

"Not with Mia, I hope," he said.

Dao clicked a few times, shaking her headwww.N(e)veL(w)rm.Cóm

"Yeah," Jes said. "He's probably trying to fuck Acelina again."

"Wh--"

"One of the spire mothers."

Caera and Dao both sighed happily, earning a raised brow from David. When they noticed, all three ladies held out their hands in front of them, cupping nonexistent giant breasts that left them all in the dust.uWw.N(e)veL(w)rm.coM

"Uh..."wW©.N(e)veL(w)rm.čOm

Dao giggled, clicked a few times, and patted David on the shoulder before she peeked out again.

"Spire mothers help raise the eggs," Caera said, "and they help make sure young demons who survive the hatchery get to escape the pit."

"And get a taste of them, too," Jes said, nodding and grinning.

Dao clicked excitedly, nodding.

"Eggs? Taste?" How demons were born was just one of the many questions he'd had, and had promptly forgot about when shit hit the fan.

"I'll explain when we're safe," Caera said. "Let's go up. Better vantage point."

The four of them scaled the mountain. It wouldn't be long before the fire sky died down, and the twilight hours began, a bad time to be out and about, but David wanted to make sure he understood everything about the place before they made any kind of plans. Unfortunately, the only plan coming to his head at the moment was to duck and cover, and pray things got better. Maybe someone would hear the prayers?

Probably not.

It was a big valley, surrounded by mountains. None of the mountains were insanely tall, but that didn't make climbing them any easier. Lots of jagged rocks. Lots of places where a misplaced step meant sliding enough to slice open a calf muscle against a sharp rock, or break a toe. Lots of places where there was no path, just climbing, and David was again super thankful he put in the time to get strong, especially with the armor and the broken sword weighing him down.

But his feet were tough now, fingers too, and he felt comfortable enough holding onto an outcropping of stone to look out and admire the horrible beauty of the valley, the spire, and the spikes and pillars that circled it. They were too far away for the demons down there to see them as anything more than small blurs against the rocks. It was the only thing that made traveling around Death's Grip even possible, that the dark stone, shades of red, brown, and black, matched the demons' skin and his cloak perfectly.