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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."w(ω)W.N(ω)vELwórm.(c)OM

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."w(ω)W.N(ω)v(ι)WóR(m).(c)om

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©ww.N(ω)v.L(ι)Or(m).(c)M

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."