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They went through the same thing as last time, mostly. Daoka took center stage and fucked him, Jes and Caera had fun with her while she did, and Acelina grumbled and groaned and masturbated, but refused to take part. At least she didn't get angry. If anything, she seemed relieved. Probably because it meant David's aura would finally calm down.

And it would, for a while. But just the knowledge that his body didn't seem interested in a refractory period, or had any sort of limit on its sexual stamina or desire, was a kernel of knowledge in his mind that didn't go away. It was like kindling, a giant pile of dry paper kindling, and each time he looked the girls' way and noticed their bodies, his brain shot off sparks right on top of it.

Getting back topside, out of a ravine, and back up to where they could look out over Hell, put a stop to that quick.

"The fuck is that?" David asked, and he pointed back toward the spire. It was a tiny sliver in the distance now, but the glowing amber beam coming out of it shooting into the fire sky was not.

The group of them found some enormous boulders to stand between, and all of them stared at the giant beam. It almost looked like a SciFi scene, a pulsing laser punching a hole through the sky. *Ww.nove()w0Rm.(c)om*

Caera, Dao, and Jes stood there, silent.

"A demon is undergoing the trial to become the new spire ruler," Acelina said. "If Saldavin yet lives, I imagine it is he." Sighing, she shook her head. "Curse the rider."

David did his best to not flinch. He succeeded. Barely.

"Wait, you've seen this before?" Jes asked. "Fuck, you saw Zel being chosen? How old are you, Acelina?"

"Old." In Hell, getting old was good, something to show off.

"How's it work?" David asked.

"A demon must enter the depths of the spire, to the deepest bowels where Lucifer has left their temple. If the spire has no ruler at the time, something will be there, and the demon will be tested." Before they could ask, she shrugged. "I did not witness the ritual itself, only the result, and Zelandariel did not share with me the details. But I do know the ritual is life threatening and difficult." *w@w.Nove/w0r@.com*

"So only a powerful demon can do it?" Caera asked. "I guess that's why the spire rulers are all tetrads."

"Indeed." With a small flourish of her tail, Acelina turned and gestured clockwise around Hell. "This way, then?"

"In a minute," Jes said.

"I do not wish to see the spire any longer."

"I do."

Acelina spun around and flared her wings. *Ww.novE/w0@om.com*

"Must you make every moment of this struggle difficult for me?"

Grinning up at her, Jes hooked her wings snug around her shoulders, and walked past her.

"Yeah. I must. Bitch."

Caera looked David's way, rolled her eyes, and prowled ahead of the group. They followed.

"It'll be nearly two weeks before we reach the mountain where I found that tunnel," Caera said. "Another few weeks at least to reach the Grave Valley spire. We really should try to get along, Jes."

"I agreed to take her along. I didn't agree to play nice. The fuck is this, some HR meeting?" The scrying pool references were unending, and David laughed. Which, of course, earned a grin from Jes, and a scowl from Acelina.

"Uh, maybe a different topic?" David asked. "I've been thinking."

"Crazy," Jes said.

He frowned at her, but despite his efforts, it turned into a smile as Jes grinned at him some more.

"The stranger who told us we need to get to the Forgotten Place, she refused to elaborate on anything. The angels we ran into before, they--"

"You met angels?" Acelina asked.

"Yes," Caera said. "Lot of power in a small package. They kicked our asses, just two of them. It wasn't even a fight."

The woman angel had been Dao's size, and the man had been around seven feet tall. They were, by human standards, big. Small wasn't exactly a fair description.

"We just telling Acelina everything now?" Jes asked.

Sighing, Caera gestured around at the mountains ahead of them, and the winding, horrible paths they'd have to weave and navigate to get up to higher vantage points. A lot of mountains. Death's Grip was nothing but harsh mountains, burning bushes, amber veins, the occasional stream of lava, bloodgrip vines, and tunnels. Every step was dangerous, with a thousand places someone could ambush them from, or they could trip and break every bone in their body as they fell and rolled a kilometer down a jagged hillside.

It wouldn't get any better in the Grave Valley, probably.

"On this journey, if we're taking her," Caera said, "we have to trust her at least a little."

"Why?" Jes asked. "I vote we tell her to hang back while we talk about important stuff."

Dao clicked a few times and gestured back at Acelina and David. *W(w)W.NovE/w0rM.com*

Jes shook her head. "She's a stumbling bimbo idiot. I doubt she could eavesdrop without us knowing."

Even Caera knew that wasn't true, and she shook her head, too.

"What I'm saying is, if we're convinced we should take her with us, we need to trust her. You haven't done one of these journeys before, I have. Same reason we're teaching... trying to teach her to hunt, right?"

"It isn't the same."

"It is." Caera patted the ground with her tail. "Shit is going to happen, and we're going to need to talk about it. I will not spend the next five weeks worried about every word I say, Jes."

David gulped. Either Jes really, really didn't trust Acelina, or she was worried about the secret Acelina didn't know. The rider didn't kill Zel, Mia did. If Acelina found out about that, it could be trouble. Had Jes even told Dao or Caera?

"It's just five weeks," Jes said. "Not like we're taking her with us to the Forgotten Place."

Daoka clicked some and gestured out ahead of them.

"It's..." Sighing, Jes looked back at Acelina, and her shoulders slumped as she marched forward. "Fine."

Uh oh, the F word. David slowed down a little until he was in the back of the group, Acelina between him and the volatile gargoyle.

"I... I was wondering," he said. "The angels didn't want to tell us what was going on. The woman in aera armor didn't want to tell us, either. The rider wouldn't talk to me at all, and just came at me. It's weird, you know? No one's talking."

"You expect people to share their secrets?" Acelina asked.