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He sighed, but at least he didn't growl. He even looked at her again, turning his head so he could use both eyes.

"I should let you die."

"Maybe. But then you won't get to see what happens."

"What... happens?"

She tilted her head. "You're not curious about what's going on? A female version of the rider shows up and tells me I have to get to the Forgotten Place or we all die? You have to be at least a little curious."

That got something out of him. He rumbled, his eyes drifted up in thought, and eventually he nodded.

"Exactly," she said. "You want to rule Death's Grip, right? Can't do that if it's gone. And what ruler doesn't want to know more about what's going on around their land?" She nodded again and wiped away the mix of thoughts going through her mind. Don't hate him. Don't fear him. Don't be attracted to him. Work with him. "Once we're sure Adron and Kas are alive, we move onto the Black Valley."

"And how do you plan to learn that?"

"I'm... not really sure. How do demons usually figure things out? Like, if Alessio wanted to march her demons from the Black Valley to Death's Grip and take it over, how would she know when it was a good time?"

"She wouldn't."

Mia gulped. "She'd just... send thousands of demons to fight, without knowing?"

"Tens of thousands."

"Fucking yikes."

"And there are some unreliable ways. Scouts and spies, or the imps and grems, who take months to report back."

"Imps and grems?"

He nodded. "The infernal pests chatter with each other incessantly, and travel around Hell frequently."

"Oh, so... gossip. We can catch an imp or grem, and figure out what they're saying on the grapevine?"

His turn to tilt his head.

She laughed and shrugged. "Never mind." Smiling, she patted his abs. Woop, nope, don't do that. Abs are sexy and Vinicius was twelve feet tall. His abs were almost as big as her whole body. "And hey, it's not like I don't understand this is Hell, the people here are awful, and demons do demon things."

Somehow, miraculously, that made the big asshole chuckle, quietly anyway.

"No demon cares what a human thinks of us."

She frowned up at him. That wasn't true. Adron proved that.

"My point is, if something comes up that's particularly... something you know I won't enjoy but you want to do, I'm not going to stop you. Probably."

He grunted. *Ww.NovèLw.r@c(m)*

"I mean it! I mean, it's the least I can do since I'm forcing you to help me, right? Demons do demon things. As long as it's not to someone who doesn't deserve it, and I don't imagine we'll run into those people often, you can... be... demony. *Ww.NovèLw.r@c(m)*

He eyed her, a slow, gentle rumble flowing through him, and the vibration reached down through his leg right up her butt. What she was saying might be a problem in the future, but she did mean it. Much as it would hurt seeing Vin murder and... do other things, to demons and humans, she had to accept that she was in Hell and her whole morality code didn't really apply down here. Different world. Different rules. *Ww.NovèLw.r@c(m)*

"I'll hold you to that," he said, and licked some of his crocodile teeth.

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~~Day 34~~

Finally! Sunlight! Or, firelight. Whatever. The sky of swirling amber and deadly flame looked beautiful compared to rock and stone walls.

Vinicius walked ahead of her, but walk turned to climb when the only way out of the tunnel turned into a literal wall. At least the way up was a tunnel, too, so Vinicius had rocks in front and behind him to grab and pull on. A tough climb for any demon. An impossible climb for a short human without claws, so she rode his back and stood on the many giant spikes there.

Lifting his own bodyweight must have been an insane challenge, and sure enough, Vin's wounds reopened and leaked blood down his body. Mia wore her torn and half ruined sash toga thing again, permanently red now, and she was tempted to take it off and wrap it around Vin's neck again as it started to bleed again. She couldn't do it while he climbed, though, and now that he was mostly, kinda, sorta healed, he wouldn't accept her help, anyway.

Four arms made the climbing easier. He might not have been able to do it without them. His muscles bulged, a lot, and Mia had to force down a squeak as she watched them practically pulse with his heartbeat with each foot he climbed. His back, his arms, his legs, they were all just so ridiculously huge, and all of them, even his tail, worked to keep his weight on the grooves in the rock wall.

He got them out of the hole, and Mia climbed down his body.

"Finally!" she yelled in her whisper voice, and jumped a few times, hands in the air. "We survived!"

Vinicius grumbled, put a hand on each of his wounds again, and walked toward the edge.

Edge? Oh shit, they'd come out on a mountain. She shouldn't have been surprised, since all sense of verticality had been lost after wandering around tunnels for a week. After a healthy dose of vertigo had her tilting and swaying for a couple seconds, she followed Vinicius to the edge of the mountain.

The spire was in sight, barely. Judging from the shape of the mountains, Vin and Mia had moved counter-clockwise around Hell -- because otherwise they'd have hit the ravine again -- and toward its outer edge a bit. Unfortunately, the winding tunnels meant for all their walking, they hadn't covered much ground.

Unfortunate if her only goal was to get to the Forgotten Place. She had another goal.

"Okay," she said, "so we find an imp or grem, and ask them if Adron or Kas are..." Vin's silence was like a steel knife through the guts.

He stared out to the valley below where the spire and the ravine were, dragon snout aimed up slightly at the spire's tip. It wasn't tilting as much anymore, but they were too far to see if it'd repaired any of the damage caused by the ravine. That wasn't what Vin stared at. He stared at the giant amber beam shooting out of the spire straight up into the fire sky. *Ww.NovèLw.r@c(m)*

"What is that?" she asked.

Vin rumbled, and his two free hands flexed, as if crushing another gargoyle's rib cage in his giant grip.

"Someone has begun the trial."

"Trial?"

"To become the new spire ruler."

"Oh. I didn't know that required an actual trial. A--oh you mean, like, a struggle or something." The image of a bunch of demons sitting in jury seats, while a demon judge wielded a wooden hammer, made her smile. She wiped it away quickly. "How does that work?"

"Someone must engage the book of Lucifer in the depths of the spire, and be challenged."

"Right, that book. That was a scary book."

Vin looked down at her, eyes donning a new intensity, and waited.