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Jes rolled her eyes. Caera sat down across from the pool. Even Acelina eventually joined them, and sat in the typical overly-feminine way she liked, leaning on one hip and both legs to one side. No one said a thing, and all five of them gazed down into the fire the scrying pool had focused on. The scrying pool's supposed purpose was to make souls miss the surface, but it had upsides, too, and this was definitely one of them.

Nothing soothed the soul quite like sitting around a fire and watching wood burn. The fires of Hell were nothing like it, not even the burning bushes that never really burned. And absolutely nothing in Hell even came close to the sound of ocean waves. Ten, twenty, thirty minutes slipped by as they rest, recuperated, and listened for laser bombardments by angels. None came, yet.

Movement drew their eyes again. Whoever was in the tunnel, hiding around the distant boulders and curves of the cruel tunnels, they stuck their head out again. Heads. Four heads?

"Begone," Acelina said, and she flared out one of her wings. Mistake. She hissed and growled, and held the huge thing in front of her so she could inspect it. Yeap, she'd made some holes in the membrane worse, and a bit of blood lined the inner contours of the tears.

Surprisingly, Jeskura didn't automatically say the opposite of Acelina. She glanced the imps and grems' way, but set her eyes back on scrying pool instead.

"We worried about the imps or grems saying anything?" David asked.

Caera shook her head. "No. Imps and grems talk a lot, but they forget things, they miss out key details, and they twist the story the more they repeat it."

"Ah. The telephone game."

Dao clicked twice.

"It's a game kids play. You sit in a circle, and someone starts the game. They whisper something to a kid beside them, then the second kid repeats the whisper to the next kid. By the time you've gone around the circle, the message has changed."

Caera laughed, and winced as she clutched her side.

"Uh, not exactly like that. They're just not smart enough to give the details straight. Or remember them straight."

David leaned to the side slightly, looked past the tiger lady, and down the tunnel to the creatures in the distance. Four of them, poking their heads up around boulders far enough he could see their horns, and all of them had their wings out. It was hard to see from a distance, but the four creatures looked unharmed.

"They might know their way around," David said.

"Probably," Jes said. "But they're imps and grems. Best you can hope from them is remnant cleanup."

"Can't work with them?"

She shrugged. "Sometimes? Hard to predict."

So imps and grems weren't children so much as they were a simpler kind of demon, less intelligent, and more driven by their impulses. They certainly didn't look like children. Sure, their heads were a little larger relative to their bodies compared to Jes and the others, with bigger eyes to match, but they were more like mini demons, four feet tall.www.nove@worm.com

And just as capable of bloodthirsty murder and violence, if memory served. It was his first memory after hitting the red river, waking up on shore with a bunch of imps and grems about to eat him, and clearly enjoying themselves, too.

"Sure you don't know these tunnels, Caera?" he asked.

"Only imps and grems use these smaller tunnels, with all the bloodgrip everywhere. I'm sure it connects to other tunnels in the area, though, and then I can find my way to Renato."

"Well, those imps and grems look completely unharmed."

Acelina glanced back to the creatures. "And?"

"And, they must be familiar with these tunnels. We can't go five feet without this happening." He gestured down at his shins, covered in cuts and streaks of blood. "Look at them. They got their wings out and everything. No injuries."

"They are pests." With a harsh scoff, Acelina held her wing in front of her and hissed as she ran the blunt side of her claws along the bloodied rips and tears.

"Dao?" he asked.

Dao chirped a few times, tilted her head, shrugged, and gestured to him. Alright, leaving it up to him.

He got up and tested his balance. Head didn't throb nearly as bad anymore. Concussion? In Hell, who knew, but probably not. Wounds seemed to be a simpler concept in Hell, and weird complications just weren't a thing.

Dao got up with him and stayed close as he slowly walked toward the little demons.

"Hi," he said, in a voice a little too close to how he'd talk to a random dog or cat he'd stumbled upon outside on the road. Dumb. He cleared his throat and spoke normally. "Hey. We're--"

"Unmarked!" one of the gremlas squeaked. "You're unmarked!"

He rubbed his forehead and pulled his hair aside enough to show it off.

"Yeah. Heard of me?"

"Heard of girl." The little creature crept forward. The tunnel was only ten feet tall and wide, with plenty of boulders and bloodgrip everywhere. Somehow, she seamlessly moved around without hurting herself. Imps and grems couldn't be all that stupid if they navigated places like this without getting a scratch.

He was tempted to squat down, but, again, that'd be treating them like a wild cat or dog, and not the deadly creatures they were. They were four feet tall, but had enough claws and muscle and teeth they could rip him to shreds.www.nove@worm.com

Two imps and two gremlas. The rest of them came forward, each with big, curious eyes that looked less like a child's eyes, and more like an eagle's or owl's 'is that food I see' eyes. The closer impa had a few scars on her, but otherwise they were really similar, with shoulder-length black dreadlocks, and random bits of black armor, just like Caera, Jes, and Dao.

Imps were basically mini gargoyles, except their tails ended in spades like a succubus or incubus's. Grems lacked the tail, and walked on hooves, but were otherwise the same, a couple wings and horns just like the imps, and cute-ish faces that quickly became startling when they opened their wide, scary mouths, not unlike Acelina's. Combined with their slender stomachs and fit physiques, they were very attractive, like mini Jeskuras, but also a little unsettling, like a swarm of large-eyed piranha.

No guys in this group. Sisters? Weird. Hell didn't do sisters.

"You know about the unmarked girl?" he asked.

"At spire. Everyone knows."www.nove@worm.com

"Right, right." How to play this? He could lie about himself, make up anything, and if the girls were right, imps and grems wouldn't be smart enough to tell he was lying. Or maybe they were? Being dumb didn't necessarily mean you didn't know how to deal with people, or vice versa. Case in point: himself. "You four know these tunnels well?"

"Do. We do," the closest impa said, fluttering her wings. One of the gremlas came up, chirped a few times, and gestured at David. The closest impa spoke. "Red hair. Freckles. Brother?" Apparently, not so dumb.

"Yeah, she's my sister."

"Not here?"

"Other side of the ravine."www.nove@worm.com

The impa shivered and rubbed her arms as she looked up at him with her big, red eyes.

"Ravine scary. Blackness scary."

David laughed. "Yeah, you're right."

The impa came a little closer. Less than ten feet away, she stood up a little straighter and hooked her wings around her shoulders, cloak-style like Jes and Acelina often did.

"Why unmarked?" she asked.

"I don't know. It's a mystery I'm trying to solve." He gestured past her to the tunnel. "My friends and I need to get through these tunnels. Think you can help us out?"