

## 1314

Before he could so much as gulp, Jes poked him in the back with a claw.

"Ow!"

"I can feel that aura. Stop it."

"I didn't--"

"They're not sisters."

"I didn't say they were!"

"Uh huh. Anyone can see that sister fetish from a mile away, perv." Jes leaned in close until she was directly behind him. "Hatchmates sometimes stick together for a long time."

"And... get... like that?" He gestured to the four little women as they ran ahead down the narrowing, cruel tunnel, before gesturing for the rest of them to follow.

"Sometimes. Imps and grems in particular, because they fuck like... rabbits? Right? That's the surface animal?"

He coughed. "It is. [tw@t.com](#)"

"And now you've got four of them, all sisters, too, ready to--"

"You just said they're not--"

"All of them excited to help us and the unmarked soul." She laughed, leaned down, hit the back of his head with her horns, and whispered. "You're not gonna be happy when they get playful and flirty with you, and then try and eat your heart."

"They won't do that... will they?"

She leaned down lower and put her chin on his shoulder so she could whisper directly into his ear as they walked.

"I told you they're unpredictable, even to themselves. They resist sin auras, and even spire commands. You can't rely on them, can't trust them, can't anything them."

"Like children?"

"Nothing like human children. They're not kids. Don't think of them like that. They're just volatile, tiny demons with as much a desire for violence and sex as any other demon. Don't let your guard down."

He managed a nod, and Jes let him go. Only now that the group of them were in the dark tunnel, stepping around boulders and weaving around vines, did the absurdity of what just happened sink in. He'd just recruited a couple imps and a couple grems to take them through the worst tunnels he'd ever seen, tunnels his girls didn't know, tunnels that were too small and too nasty for anyone bigger than an imp or grem to fight in. If anything went wrong, they were fucked. If the grems and imps betrayed them, they were fucked.

Daoka clicked quietly a few times as she stepped up beside him again, only to hiss and kick at some bloodgrip with her hoof. Acelina did similar, getting close, only to hiss and growl and stomp some of the vine with her much bigger hooves. It wasn't long before they had to get in single file, and Acelina's constant hissing announced how much trouble she was having. [w@v@ve@w@rm.com](#)

"Caera," David said. "Can--"

The tiger looked back at him, and growled. An amber vein lit her eyes for a half second, and that was more than long enough to stop David in his tracks. She looked different.

"What?" she asked.

"I just... wanted to talk about this mission we're going on."

"You said you'd help."

"I know, and I will. But, I don't have a Cainite's clothes, right?" He gestured to himself. "I mean, I guess the loincloth and half breastplate is close enough."

"It might have to be."

He winced. "But, that's not what I was going to say. I just wanted to ask about..."

"Spit it out, David." She didn't bother whispering.

"We have angels chasing us, apparently. They might find a way into the tunnel."

"Maybe."

"What do we do if that happens?"

"Avoid them."

He chewed on the inside of his cheek. How to word this.

"What I mean is, if we get put in a position where we have to leave the Cainites alive, so we can get away from the angels, what will you do?"

All that got him was another growl, and a cold shoulder. Either she didn't know, or she knew she was so invested in the warpath they'd suddenly found themselves on, she might just do something stupid and get them all killed. And much as he wanted to point that out to her, he didn't need Mia to tell him that was a recipe for a disaster. Besides, Caera was smart, and probably knew what he was thinking already. Hopefully.

The one-eighty on her personality was still a shock, though. He knew she hated Cainites, and particularly this possible group of them, but he hadn't expected reasonable, introspective Caera to go Rambo on him. And all at the mercy of four little critters they couldn't trust with a potato gun.

Mission one: figure out if they can trust the imps and grems.

"Can I... get past you?" he asked.

"Why?"

"I want to talk to the imps and grems. I need to, uh, make sure we're on the same page."

He wasn't talking to a tregeera demon anymore, at least not the smart, calm one he knew. He was talking to a literal tiger, one of those big Siberian ones that made lions look tiny, and he made sure his voice was sufficiently meek and pathetic. After another quiet growl, she stopped and tilted her body to the side enough he could slip by. [@w@ve@w@rm.com](#)

"Thanks," he said.

She said nothing, only made one of those half growl half rumble sounds in her throat he rarely heard from her. Scary.

David caught up with the imps and grems, and matched their pace. Time to make sure the little critters were trustworthy... ish.

"Hey, La... La... Sorry, I suck with names."

"Lasca," the impa said, and she grinned at him with a big smile. Yeap, just like Acelina's smile, wide and huge and full of sharp shark teeth. Unlike Acelina, she had big, red demon eyes forever balancing on cute and psycho menace. [w@v@ve@w@rm.com](#)

"Laria," another said.

"Laara."

"Latia."

David put up his hands. "Sorry, that's gonna be hard for me, remembering names."

The girls all giggled, and Lasca slowed down enough to walk only a foot in front of David. Her thin tail brushed his shins, and hit the dozens of tiny cuts there. Ow.

"Unmarked is funny," Lasca said. "Lasca!"

"Laara!"

"Latia!"

"Laria!"

Oh god, they even said it in a different order.

"Lasca," he said. "I wanted to ask about what we're doing, and what's going on. There's a lot of Cainites in these tunnels?"

"Yes."

"From what you said earlier, that isn't normal?"

"No, not normal. Souls hide. Cainites hide. We'd eat them if we caught them. So they hide."

He raised a brow. "But not anymore?"

"No! Too many. Killed our imps and grems, other hatchmates, and bigger demons!"

Caera snorted. "Cainites aren't that strong. There are some powerful demons in these tunnels, Renato included."

The impa shook her head, big eyes desperate.

"Not true! Strong! Weapons glow!"

"Glow?" David asked.

"Glow red! Black swords. Black axes. Meera metal, but glow! Veins. Red veins." Lasca shivered and rubbed her arms. "They burned!"

David looked back at Caera, and the tiger lady nodded as she shared his grimace. There'd been one other weapon they'd seen that had red veins and burned things: the rider's axes. The rider's axes weren't meera metal, though, but made of something else, something silvery, shiny, and reflective.

Shit just kept getting weirder and weirder.

"When did this start happening?" he asked.

"She's an impa, David," Caera said. "She's not going to--"

"Month!" Lasca said, and she glared back at Caera. "Month! Or... close?" With a very determined nod and more determined, glaring eyes, she frowned back at the much bigger demon before looking up to David. "Scrying pool said month before. I remember!"

"A month." Oh fuck. "So, like... maybe around thirty-six days ago?"

"Maybe," Lasca said. "Strange number. Why number?"

Because he died thirty-six days ago.