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He very very carefully stepped around the fact that this whole excursion was a detour they didn't really need to do. Everyone was on board to go to False Gate and then the Forgotten Place, and this trip was purely to help Caera with something completely unconnected. He'd promised he'd help, and he would, but they didn't have time for this *sw(ω)W.N.v(e)EW.rtm.©.m*

Judging from the glare Caera gave him over her shoulder, she knew that, and knew he was thinking about it.

"Lasca," he said, "you know a place where the Cainites patrol? Maybe just a few of them?" *w(ω)W.N.v(e)EW@r.M.c@m*

"Patrol." She scratched a horn. "Patrol..." Did she know what patrol meant? "Five stay together. Walk in circle. Tunnel below us." Yeap, she did.

"Think we can sneak up on them?"

"Maybel Very dangerous." Her big eyes lowered to the ground, and she stopped. "Lot of demons dead. Dead friends."

Friends? He almost said it out loud, but glanced at Jes instead. She shrugged. Friendship wasn't exactly common in Hell, and according to her, imps and grems were crazy volatile. What friendship meant to an imp or grem, he didn't know, and neither did Jes. But Lasca certainly looked sad, and with her big eyes, he couldn't help but get sucked into the obvious depression dripping from the mini gargoyle.

But then she stood up straight, put on a big shark smile that would have given Acelina a run for her money, and saluted him.

"We find! We kill! Then kill leader!"

"You know where their leader is?"

"No. Maybe. Far from here. Kilomiles clockwise."

"Kilomiles?" he asked.

Lasca nodded with the utmost confidence, but didn't explain. Okay, kilomiles. He could work with that.

He looked back at Acelina. Even with the tunnels opening up and spreading out, the nine-foot-tall demoness had to be careful with every step, either to keep her long wings from snagging on anything, or to keep her steps quiet, something she'd never had to do in the spire. That wasn't so bad, except that the woman had a hundred cuts on her legs, and a hundred on her wings, some going clear through the membrane. She'd only recently stopped bleeding.

He slowed down until he walked beside her, with everyone else ahead of them.

"You okay?" he asked.

After aiming her featureless face down at him for a few silent seconds, she sighed and scoffed.

"Marvelous." The sarcasm was deadly.

"Still want to journey with us?"

"Of course not. Do you have any idea how terrible angels are, little soul?"

"I mean, a little? Two of them--" *Ww@.m©(v)elworm.c.M*

"If given the chance, and the room to maneuver, a single angel can defeat a tetrad demon in combat." She gestured to one of the giant statues looming over them as they walked past.

"Fucking yikes." He stopped for a second to gulp and look the tetrad up and down. A korgejin, which meant giant wings, hooves, no tail, and one of those classic demony skull-like faces, complete with a lot of scary teeth. "The angels I saw were barely bigger than humans. Except... that one big one I saw right at the gate."

Acelina shivered.

"I have never seen such a creature," she said, "but Zelandariel mentioned the angels of the council before. She has never... had never seen one either."

Wincing, he nodded and kept his eyes ahead.

"You going to leave us, then, when we get out of this tunnel?" *Ww.v.nóVe(1)wórm.com*

"To what end? That would be suicide. I am no tetrad. I am a spire mother. What chance do I have against the outside world and its elements and denizens?"

"Well, I mean..." He gestured up at her. Walking side by side, his head hovered around her hips and waist. She was a big lady.

"My size and strength will do little to aid me against a swarm of Cainites, or hungry demons."

"I dunno. Jes says you can create some really powerful sin auras, too?"

"More powerful than yours, for certain." She scoffed again and aimed her face down at him. "Your strange auras are but ticklish things compared to what I can craft."

He smiled back up at her. "Yeah?"

"Indeed. I could have most of the spire itself buried in either suicidal violence, or an orgy of unending proportions, if I so chose. The sin auras of the others are nothing compared to mine."

He tried to keep his smile under control, but something about Acelina being angry, uptight, and boastful made him happy. Apparently, the zotiva was her most comfortable when being a royal bitch, and insulting him and the other girls brought some zip and pep back to her voice. It also meant she got to spend a few more seconds not paying so much attention to the pain she was probably in.

It passed quickly, and she hissed as she held out one of her long wings in front of her. With gentle claws, she traced the holes, earning more hisses.

"How long will you take to heal?" he asked. "I mean, assuming you can heal that."

"I can. Given time, a demon can heal almost any wound."

"Yeah?" He looked to Caera. She was far ahead enough she probably didn't hear them whisper. Hopefully, "I guess spire seals are different."

She looked down at him again. "You tell me. You are the unmarked. Your kind can read the ancient language, and can understand and recognize the symbols of the spire."

"My kind? Five weeks ago, I was just a regular human. The most boring human alive, I'll have you know." He waved a hand. "I wanted to know if you were doing okay, that's all. We're all pretty banged up, but you got really ripped up in there."

Again she aimed her head down at him, and with her mouth closed, her face was nothing but a black, featureless mask. Eventually, she looked ahead again, but it was a little while longer before she responded.

"I am hurt. But I will be fine."

"Good."

She tilted her head enough she was probably looking at him, but he couldn't be certain. Whatever reason she had to glance his way, she stayed silent, looked forward again, and the two of them walked side by side without saying a word.