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"Hellbeasts?"

"No. Most demons die fighting other demons."

"That... was my second guess, yeah. Demons don't seem to get along."

She shook her head. "It's more than that. Demons... they..." Whatever it was she wanted to say, she couldn't, and let silence hang over them instead.

He was an idiot. He'd thought maybe his conversation with her before had helped her. Maybe it had a little, but reality slapped him in the face good and hard. He wasn't Mia. He didn't know shit about how to help someone mentally. On top of that, demons weren't humans, and treating her like one was narrow-minded and short-sighted.

Ugh. Why did reality have to be so messy? In TV and movies and books, one good, heart-felt conversation was all it took for people to overcome their mental barriers. Cue the sad but uplifting music, some tears, maybe some hugs and kisses, and all problems were gone. Shit didn't work like that in the real world. Or the afterlife, apparently.

"Just promise me one thing," he said. "Be careful, okay? You looked like you were ready to attack Daoka for a second there."

"I would never."

"You almost did. www.novelworm.com

"I... was caught off guard." She looked up at him again, frowning. "It won't happen." This time, she held his gaze, black and red eyes glaring into him, daring him to refute her.

He didn't.

"Okay," he said, and waited. She said nothing more though, eyes going back to scanning the tunnel.

Well, fuck. He bowed out, and walked back to the girls. So much for being able to settle this issue with his pro psychology skills.

It only took half a minute to get back to the alcove, and he'd only been gone a few, but apparently it was long enough for the entire world to flip upside down.

"Thank you," Acelina said, to Jes, in a voice so quiet it didn't sound like her at all, "for helping with my wings while we fled."

Jes, sitting behind Acelina, tended to the much bigger demon's utterly enormous wings, and she peeked past the spire mother to raise an eyebrow at David.

"Yeah, well, I saw how fucked your wings were getting. And much as you piss me off, you did good work back there."

David smiled, but did his best to make it look like he wasn't staring.

"I have never navigated such tunnels before. What is a zotiva to do with all this bloodgrip hounding me ever step?"

The Las, already checking each other's wings, chirped and clicked, and giggled at each other as they made nervous jokes about the fact a horde of remnants were behind them. Daoka chirped a few times too, sat beside Jes, and both girls combed over Acelina's long wings, searching for thorns and rocks. It was dangerously similar to human girls doing each other's hair, and so cute and... dissonant. Caera was just down the hall, being sour and angry and very demon-y, while seven demons sat in front of David right now, not acting like demons at all.

"It's a bitch," Jes said, "for sure. Took me years of hunting in tunnels until I stopped tearing my wings. And your wings are too long to ever really make that possible."

"I belong in a spire."

"Hey, no argument here. There aren't many tunnels in the Grave Valley, far as I know, though. Should be easier on you."

David watched Acelina, but the huge demoness kept her featureless face aimed down, examining her cut legs. The longer he watched her, the more he noticed body language he hadn't before, like the way her wings gently shifted in the girls' grip, instead of drooping or draping on her shoulders. Her tail gently and slowly wagged on the stone ground, and every so often, she ran the blunt side of her claws along her legs. She seemed... relaxed? Relaxed demon behavior?

Where was Mia when he needed her?

David got back up and walked back out of the alcove.

"David?" Jes asked.

"I'm not going anywhere, don't worry." But after seeing that, he had to try again. www.novelworm.com

Caera still sat in her cat-like pose, on her butt with her two front arms straight down in front of her, claws on the ground. Her tail was dead still. www.NovelWorm.COM

"David, go back to--"

David sat beside her, earning an annoyed glare from her.

"You had me fooled, you know. www.novelworm.com

"What?"

"For a second there, I thought demons were these very... un-human things that I shouldn't be trying to talk to like a human. But that's not true, is it? Sure, you're a demon, and that means you're different. You get angry in ways humans don't. You get bloodthirsty in ways humans don't. But you're still more similar than not." He scooted closer until their legs touched. "I'm not Mia. I don't know shit about what to say to help someone. But... I know you're hurting. The least I can do is be here, with you, if you'll let me. I want to be here."

Too cheesy? It sounded like something he'd heard in some shit 90s sitcom, or a worse, an awful modern show full of self-therapy writing. But it was still true.

Caera looked at him, eyes softening. She opened her mouth, stopped herself, sighed, chuckled, sighed again, and shook her head until her short dreadlocks bounced.

She leaned in and kissed him.