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"Yes ma'am."

She looked back over her spiky shoulder at him, frowning, but it melted as he gave her his best military salute.

"We protect!" Lasca said.

Caera shook her head. "No. If you want to help us, if you want revenge on the Cainites, we need you on the flanks."

"Flanks?" Laara asked.

"Fla--just, when I get in there, surround the Cainites from the outside. Their lefts and rights, or high up, okay? Daoka and Jeskura will follow me in down the center, but the four of you should go in on the flanks. Acelina comes in after. Clean up."

"Problem," Jes said. "This is all assuming we just... find them, in a big room, standing around talking to each other."

"I know the layout of the temple grounds. The tactic will work."

"Unless they have archers," David said. "But, that doesn't seem to be a thing in Hell, does it?"

"No," Caera said. "Too difficult to make any of the parts. Burning bushes are too brittle, and there's no good way to make string. And then there's the arrows. No one's figured those out."

"Makes sense. You can't fire an arrow straight without fletching, and I can't even begin to imagine what you'd make that out of. Feathers? Does Hell have feathers? And--"

Jes slapped him in the back, but also came in for a quick kiss on the cheek.*Www.no©ELW(o)rm.com*

"Just stay out of the way," she said. "If you die, then who knows what the fuck will happen to the rest of us?"

"Maybe other unmarked will make the journey? Maybe Mia will?"

"Maybe. Or maybe you just listen to us, and stay back." She pulled on his shoulder strap with her wing claw, and he had to step back to keep from falling on his ass. Daoka and the Las guided him until he stood in the back with Acelina. They resumed the journey*Ww.noVE©W©©m.c.c.M*

He took a moment to look Acelina up and down. The armor fit her well enough. No one talked about how it was Renato's armor, the only stuff big enough to fit her height and curves. And as much as she kinda looked really, really sexy, with her larger parts covered in the bent sheets of metal held snug by leather straps, he couldn't get aroused knowing where it'd came from.

The demons marched on, ready for a battle where any of them could die. Fearless. Courageous. Was it courageous if you felt no fear? Were they actually fearless, or just great at suppressing it? He was fucking terrified, but he was doing what he always did, intellectualizing, taking his emotions and putting them in a box. He could open it later and have a mental breakdown where it wouldn't get him killed.

The march continued on at a good pace, since Cainites cleared the vines out. No one talked, even the Las, and normally the little ladies talked incessantly; usually as tiny, innocent chirps with each other, but enough to get on Acelina's nerves. Now they said nothing.

It was pretty amazing, thinking about it, how quickly the four Las had adapted to their group dynamic. The other imps and grems they'd run into had wanted no part of their band of merry adventurers, and were much happier avoiding the Cainites entirely. Some had even been violent, and if it hadn't been for the Las, probably would have made for quick snacks for Caera and the gang. But they'd run off once they'd realized David and the girls were all together. Unpredictable, like Jes said. But the Las were proving very dependable, relative to other imps and grems. He'd have to ask them about themselves, later.

Caera gestured for them to get down but keep going, and they did. Or they tried, anyway. The treguera had an easy time of it, already going on four legs, but everyone else had to crouch. Acelina had the hardest time, and eventually she fell back far enough she was behind David. Slow and steady, not a word, not a click.

Voices ahead sent heat through David's body, mixing with a cold chill, like rage mixing with adrenaline. Everyone slowed down even more, and Caera prowled ahead like a tiger getting closer to prey. There'd been plenty of tunnels to take, but Caera had picked this one specifically.

Good thing she did. It opened up in a higher position than David figured, with a big cavern awaiting them below, with slopes that almost looked like stairs connecting the cavern to other tunnel holes. They'd come in on the highest one, and below, Cainites drifted around to lower tunnels, weapons in their arms or resting on their shoulders as they went out on hunts.

One side of the cavern was flat. No, not flat. He stared at the distant wall, barely illuminated by the amber veins along the cave wall around it, until the strange shape clicked in his head.*www.(n)o(v)Elw©©m.coM*

It was a temple. Someone had carved a temple out of the stone, someone with an obsession with bones, and Gothic architecture. Except, whoever carved it -- probably Belial -- had done so long before 12th century. The temple also looked darker than most of Death's Grip's rocky surface, almost like it was made entirely of blackstone.

To make meera metal, blackstone and demon bones were mixed and forged together. Blackstone was something in the dirt, mixed in with rocks and stuff, which was why all the ground and stone in Death's Grip -- and probably all of Hell -- had a really dark color, forever kinda black and kinda red. Seeing an entire temple made of blackstone was really fucking weird, and it flickered slightly where amber veins grew near.

Its face connected to the cavern ceiling, and judging from the windows, the temple, or at least the front facing part, had two floors, each at least thirty feet tall. According to Caera, there were hallway tunnels inside it that went down, too.

How the fuck did someone carve this?*ww.(n)ovE©W©r-m.cOm*

Their tunnel exit was high enough and dark enough that the Cainites below couldn't see them, and weren't scaling the slopes to get to it. Not worth the effort to monitor the tunnel, since it wasn't like a group of demons would be suicidal enough to throw themselves at an army of Cainites armed with imbued weapons. And any demons that came running down the slope would probably run straight into Cainite swords.

"We have to get inside," Caera whispered.

"Or draw them out," Jes said, crouched low beside her. "How do you want to do this? We can still send David in and--"

"David pretending to be a lone Cainite, wandering around, was fine for getting info from others, out in the tunnels. But here? They're all in squads and organized." Caera nodded down toward the groups. She was right. Every Cainite moved with a group of others, and every one of them had one person with an imbued weapon, glowing like a tiny candle in the distance. "We have to get closer, and we have to kill them all. An ambush is the only option."

Daoka clicked quietly and gestured down.

"Maybe," Caera said. "There's a lot of them, and they're prepared. It's not like last time I was here. We were in the temple when they swarmed us, and it was chaos. This is like a small army, patrolling."