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"The rider," she whispered, "is... no one knows."

"No one knows? You said he's shown up before."

"He has, but he's just a ghost story. A human-shaped person, probably a man, who shows up so rarely he... he's just a fucking myth."

"Not exactly a myth," David said. "You're sure it's the rider?"

The three demon ladies looked at him, until Dao eventually clicked once, and they got all marching again.

"Stupid question, my bad. That goort was huge, too."

"If it's even a goort," Jes said. "I've never seen a goort that big, or with skin that black."

Caera came to a stop beside a big boulder, the four of them in a small ditch between two mountains, and she took a breather as she sat down. A break then, before going back to their cave. He didn't bother asking why they weren't heading back to their cave immediately, either. Caera wanted to avoid going straight there, in case they were being followed. If they were, going around the mountain first meant time for them to notice.

Dao, Jes, and David sat beside her, each taking some time to let the ache soothe. Crouching and sneaking so long across jagged rocks, climbing up and scaling down, was fucking hard.

"Is he even human?" he asked.

Caera shrugged. "No idea. First time I've seen him."

Dao clicked a few times.

"Right," Jes said, "if he's even a he. That armor was... thick."

"Aera armor," Caera said, pulling her tail in front of her and rubbing it. A nervous tick. "I've seen fragments of it. Adron's got a few. But a full suit? One made to perfectly fit the body?" With a shaky hand, the tiger stroked the spikes along the back of her tail. "That armor was made probably specifically for him in False Gate, thousands of years ago when demons still knew how to use the forge."

"Thousands of years," he said. "That's... That's... The fuck does that have to do with me? Why is he here? I mean yeah, we assume he's here for me, or Mia, but he's just some... guy, who's been wandering around for thousands of years?"

The ladies all shrugged.

"He killed Gorlus," Jes said, "like he was fucking nothing. Yeah, Gorlus was always an arrogant asshole, and part of the reason I left the spire, but I didn't think he was that stupid."

Dao clicked a few times."

"Could be an aura, yeah," Caera said. "We were too far. But if he's human, no way it was an aura."@Ww.noVεℓw(◊)xm.◊(◊)M

David held up a hand. "Hello?"WWW.nóεÉŁwó℞m.cóm

The tiger shook her head. "I don't know what's going on, David, but there's no reason to think the rider is unmarked like you."

"And you're sure no one's ever seen his face?"

"Not that I know."

"Then I'm putting it on the possibilities list." Nodding, he got up.

And dropped back down. The four of them stopped talking, stopped moving, stopped breathing, and let the silence of the empty mountains fill their ears.

Clop clop. Clop clop.

Caera held up a low hand, and squished herself down against the rock they hid behind. All of them did, down to the ground, with their backs and sides against the wall of stone of the mountain that was between them and where they'd seen the rider.

Clop clop. Clop clop. The sound of a walking horse on horseshoes. Goorts weren't horses, and they didn't have horseshoes, but anything that heavy was bound to make noise with each step.

More noise gently echoed through the mountains, the clopping grew louder, and was joined by the quiet clink and clank of metal on metal, armor rubbing against itself.

David snapped his eyes to Caera, but she shook her head, pointed at him and pointed at the ground underneath her. Don't go anywhere. He gulped hard, nodded, and tilted his head up.

A shadow cast over the stone, along the ground beside them, maybe a hundred feet away. There was a path above them, an outcropping of rock path that was flat enough you could walk on it, and Caera had taken them below and around it instead of on it. Too risky being exposed like that, if they were being followed. A damn smart plan. The four of them stared out to the shadow the sky of fire cast, and watched it grow closer and closer, as the rider slowly rode the path over their heads.WWw.(◊)OVLWoz(m).Com

The noises grew louder again, the weight of the rider immense and making any sort of stealth for him impossible. Could the goort gallop with someone like the rider on their back? Could the rider run? Was all this hiding even necessary?

Definitely necessary. Caera was petrified. She barely breathed, her tail didn't move an inch, and all three ladies made sure their horns were pressed back against the wall of stone. Clop clop. Dao's lip trembled, and Jes's usual angry expression was gone, replaced with wide eyes like a horrified cat. Clop clop.

Eighty feet. Seventy. Sixty. Heat surged up through David's body. The hair on his arms stood up. Electricity danced through his fingers, and he clenched them tight, trying to suppress the strange sensation. More heat flooded over him, until his eyes threatened to tear up. His muscles tightened. His heart rate soared until he felt the war drums in his veins.

He grabbed the useless sword hilt he had hooked inside the strap of his skirt, and slowly slid it out and held it in front of him. He didn't know why. Something told him to. Something told him to grab the sword, and use it. Something burned in his blood and told him to fight, to stab, to cut, to attack the rider. Attack anything.

Fight. Kill. Destroy.

Caera snapped a hand out and grabbed his. He almost sucked in a breath, a noise that might have meant their doom, but Caera's panicked eyes hit him like a bucket of ice water. He managed a weak nod, and relaxed his muscles until his hand lowered. Only then did Caera let him go.

The rider stopped. David held his breath. The shadow, a steady and solid mass of black casting over the dark red stone, shifted only slightly as the rider looked out toward the mountain opposite of him. If he came closer to the edge and looked down, he'd see the four of them. They'd have to run or fight, and Jes and Dao were in no condition to do either.

Don't move. Don't breathe. Every fiber of his being demanded he do the opposite. Something hot and searing poured over him, like rapids of lava, invisible and untouchable, but in full force and drowning him in something he could not fully explain. Rage? The animal urge to fight and defend food or territory? The urge to battle over a mate? Something scalding that shot up through his center into his heart and out into his limbs until they shook with adrenaline. His afterlife body had adrenaline? Apparently, and it flooded him until his clenching fists were sweating and his teeth ground so hard he heard them.

The rider didn't. After a few more quiet eternal seconds, the rider moved on. No snap of the reins or jamming of the heels, the goort just decided to move on, and the rider didn't argue. Either the two of them knew each other better than best friends, or the rider gave an order David couldn't hear or see in the shadow. Clop clop, clop clop, the metal armor of rider and goort clinked quietly, and the shadow moved on.

The four of them didn't move a muscle until they knew the rider had hit the curve of the mountain and had gone around it. Caera held a finger up to her lips, got on all fours, and prowled in the opposite direction. They followed.

Something had stirred the hornet's nest. More demons drifted around the mountains, and a lot of gliders jumped from cliff edge to cliff edge, perch to perch. They were looking for something. The rider? If they were on a suicide mission, sure. Whatever it was, life got a whole lot more difficult, and Caera had to take detours deep into canyons and ditches to avoid getting spotted.

If this continued into tomorrow, they had no chance of monitoring the tower, let alone approaching it. Shit.

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