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The four of them crouched along, and David learned the meaning of a leg workout. Just like his other hunt with Caera, having to crouch, squat, and creep along on toes and fingertips meant burning exhaustion in the quads until more than a few drops of sweat ran down his body. They worked their way up, slithering around big rocks, until the nearby mountains grew distant, and the point of the mountain's top grew into a sheer cliff face he wouldn't be climbing without gear.

He almost asked about getting on Caera's back, but pebbles in the ravine below shifted, no louder than a pin drop. It was enough. The four of them flattened to the rocks, turned, and peeked down into the darkness below.

Something slithered, something massive. Black skin roamed over the stones below, making less noise than anything that big should have, and its thickness nudged up against the walls of the ditch it swam through. If it had legs, David couldn't see them in the heavy shadows or through the walls of rock. It moved like a snake, or a worm, or maybe a lizard with short legs. Its back was covered in spikes, and its head looked more an alligator's than any sort of snake.

The damn thing also had to be at least fifty feet long.

He gulped, and nudged Jes. She nodded slowly, and made eye contact with him long enough to let him know that yes, she was scared of this thing, too.

They sat, and waited. The serpent creature moved along unhurriedly, exploring, not making a sound as its colossal body pushed past the stones. It didn't need armor with onyx skin. Maybe it had a red vulnerable belly, but with the way it moved its underside never exposed itself, planted flat to the ground. And he didn't want to find out. Him and the girls were just taking a trip out to see if they could get some sort of update on what was happening to the spire, no need to rush themselves into an early grave.

When it was gone, everyone took a deep breath.

"That," Jeskura said, "was a fucking wurm."

"A worm?" he asked.

"Wurm." She emphasized the 'erm' sound.

"Oh. I mean, it does look kinda worm-ish... and snake-ish, and crocodile-ish."

"It can get pretty fast when it wants to," Caera said. "But like you saw, they're normally slow, and silent. They slither around in the tunnels and catch humans and demons off guard."

He shivered. Something that big slithering around in dark tunnels? Nightmare fuel.

"Why does it hunt only during twilight hours though? If it can hunt in dark tunnels, why would the time of day matter?"

Jes shrugged. "Hellbeasts just prefer twilight hours."

"Might have something to do with Hell herself," Caera said. "She gets quiet and dark for night, almost like she's going to sleep. Hellbeasts are born of Hell. They bask during the day, sleep at night, hunt between."

"But, aren't demons born of Hell, too?"

"The spires aren't Hell's. They're Lucifer's." Shrugging again, Caera went back to the wall they'd been about to climb. "Get on."

He grinned, got on her back, got his arms around her shoulders, and held on tight as the tiger lady got vertical. Up they went, with Jes and Dao having no trouble following, the gargoyle using her claws, and Dao using her gravity-defying wall hopping skills, just like a mountain goat.

High up on the mountain, with no fear of being spotted by demons, the four of them stood at the top of a rock ledge, and stared out to the valley below. The climb took over an hour, but he'd been adamant it was worth doing. He wasn't sure if he'd been right.

The spire buzzed with demon activity. No hellbeast with half a brain would approach it, so the demons felt comfortable doing whatever it is they did in the valley around the spire. Little demons jumped from the tower, and glided down to the huge spikes below. Some perched near dangling skull braziers, and munched on things in the light they provided. Demons grouped up and chatted. Some got into fights, but short lived and non lethal. They were too far for David to see any details, no matter how hard he squinted.

"I'd give my left nut for some binoculars," he said.

Dao chirped a quiet giggle, rubbed a horn against his head, and clicked a few times.

Jes snorted on a laugh she fought to keep quiet, but even after David gave her an evil eye, she refused to translate.

"If we ever get to False Gate," Caera said, "maybe you can figure out how to make some."

"We're going to False Gate?"

The tiger shrugged. "You can't honestly expect to hang around Death's Grip for eternity, right? Shit's going to happen and force you to move. Either that invisible thing again, or the rider, or maybe Zel, or maybe some angry angels looking to smite things. Something's going to happen."

Dao and Jes both sighed at Caera's words.

"You don't know that," David said. "Maybe there are other unmarked souls out there, and they can... I dunno, attract all this attention I'm getting?" Just saying the words made him feel guilty. Passing the buck onto someone else? Bleh. "Maybe--"

The four of them spun around as a breeze hit them. It'd felt wrong, out of place, and sure enough he was right.

An arrow struck the ground at his feet. It was gold. He took a step back, but behind him was a sharp fall down onto rocks and more steep ground. Fuck.

White feathers swung out, a flare of gold hit his eyes, and he fell to his knees as he clutched them. Blinding pain, literally. Unable to open his eyes, he forced down the need to cry out, some part of his brain still able to hold onto the fact they needed to be quiet.

He braced for something to hit him, maybe bite him, stab him, grab him. Nothing followed. He knelt, clutched his eyes, and squeezed them tight as they fought off the burning white orbs that still penetrated his vision. Noise erupted around him, the grunts and growls of his protectors, and the quiet but heavy flapping of white wings that buried them in more air.

"Quiet." A voice he didn't recognize. A woman's. Heavy thuds followed, and then silence.

After a minute, the searing white orbs in his vision faded, at least enough he could open his tearing eyes and see what'd attacked them. But he knew already. There was only one thing in the afterlife -- far as he knew -- with white feathers. Like Caera had just said, angry angels looking to smite things.

Two angels stood before him. One of them had a sword and shield half the size of the giant shields he'd seen on the stairs to Heaven, a woman with dark skin, and she had her blade pointed down at Caera's exposed throat, her armored boot pressed on Caera's chest and pinning her. The angel's only bit of exposed skin was the T slit visor of her shining silver and gold armor, but visible in the darkness of twilight hours. Her eyes were obsidian. Bits of white silk hung from between the joints of her thick, beautiful, extravagant armor, similar to the angels he'd seen on the stairs of Heaven, if a bit less bulky.

Her wingspan was massive, borderline ridiculous. Her shield had a quiet glimmer, catching the ember light of the darkening sky, and her sword blade was a literal mirror, silvery, and perfect. She looked a bit over six feet tall, tall by human standards but from what David remembered, normal for an angel woman. Maybe even a little short. Definitely short compared to Caera and Jes, and about the same height as Dao. But the little angel stood on Caera's chest with violent confidence, face hard, eyes locked on David, not even breathing heavy.

Beside her stood another angel, a man, seven feet tall. His helmet left his face exposed, and the armor wasn't nearly as thick, with more sheer white silk exposed around his joints. He held a bow in his hand, a glorious thing of silver and gold, and a bowstring that shined. The nocked arrow held the same mirror blade on its tip as the woman's sword, and the arrow was aimed straight for Jeskura. His bronze eyes grinned at Jes. Tan skin. Long dark hair. Ridiculously attractive, of course. All angels were, apparently.

He had one of his feet on Daoka's throat, the satyr pinned on her back. At least the armor didn't look as heavy as the woman's, and Dao could breathe, but she didn't struggle to escape. If she did, the other angel would push her sword straight through Caera's neck. And Jes wasn't pouncing at the angel because she'd get an arrow through the face.

Situation assessed, David slowly held up his hands.

"Uh... hi?" Angels were nice people, right? Nice, beautiful and handsome, heavily armed, heavily armored, and in control of the situation.

They hadn't looked nice, when he'd bounced off the gate to Heaven. They'd looked surprised. Some of them had looked ready to kill him. The big angel had looked ready to obliterate him.

The woman sneered. "So it's true. You really are unmarked."

With a heavy gulp, he nodded, and brushed some of his shaggy red hair from his forehead to prove it. Talking was good. He might not be good at it, but it was still good, better than getting shot.

Sighing, the woman peeked toward her fellow angel, frown unending.

"You were right."

The man chuckled, nodding as he kept his smile pointed at David, and arrow still pointed at Jes.

"Not me. Romakus."

"Could you not say the demon's name?"

"If you didn't want people to associate him with you, you should pick a better bed fellow."

The woman ground her teeth, eyes hardening.

"He is not--"

"You know Romakus?" Caera asked. Mistake. The angel pressed her sword down, and the tiger hissed as the blade cut her, like someone gently dragging a scalpel across skin. Holy shit that was a sharp sword.

"Wait!" David said. "Wait. Don't hurt her, please."

The man raised a brow, and leaned in toward his friend.

"He has empathy."

"He hasn't proven that."

He shook his head, without taking his eyes off David.

"I'm pretty sure he does. You feel that?"

She ground her teeth. "The unmarked are dangerous. You can't just--"

"Romakus was right. I can feel the aura, and he's genuinely concerned for these three."

"And we should spare him because he feels empathy for demons?"

The man rolled his eyes. "Uh, what's Romakus supposed to be?"

The woman didn't like that. Her eyes flared, and her wings spread out far, blocking out the mountains behind them. Angels may not have been big compared to demons, but holy shit that was a sharp sword.

The man grinned at David. "Alright. Let's talk."