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The big demon was already turning around, and still breathing flame. It crashed against the ravine wall directly, and Mia buried her face behind Vin's shoulder again as literal flame washed over them, too close to the ravine wall it splashed backward. A second later, the flames washed down the other end of the ravine, and Noah yelled in pain. New vibrations shot up through Vinicius's body. Thump. Thump. Even with her eyes closed, there was no mistaking the sensation of her giant bodyguard walking, each step taking him closer to Noah as he bathed the area in hellfire. *wWw.n@ve(i)Worm.com*

Ten seconds, or an eternity later, the sounds of thundering flame and cracking rock stopped. The vibration of step impacts stopped. Everything stopped.

Mia opened her eyes. Flames, gone. Heat, dissipating. She sucked in a breath, peeked over her bodyguard's shoulder, and sucked in another as her eyes fell on the angel Noah. He was alive, on a knee, and doing his best to hide behind his shield, but it wasn't nearly big enough. Flames surrounded him, bits of fire that danced on the partly melted stones, and a big triangle of untouched stone extended outward behind him. He didn't have a gold shield wall to summon, like the other angel did, and his wings had paid the price. They were half burned, some on fire, most of them blackened.

"You thought I would be easy to kill, because I was bound and starved before, and am injured now," Vin said, rumbling as he spoke. "Weak. You try to murder a defenseless girl. Vile. You try to fight a child of Belial with only three angels? Foolish." This, was a lot of talking from her bodyguard. "Over two centuries have come and gone. What has Heaven done in that time? How pathetic have angels become?" He took another step toward Noah, and another, and the angel struggled to get back to his feet as his burned wings hung limp.

Boasting, from Vinicius? A pause in the noise of battle and flame told her why. He was out of breath, and his heart pounded inside his chest so hard she felt it through his back.

"Vin," she said. "You should--"

Vin spun around as flapping sounds sprung up behind them, and he slashed out with two of his hands. The angel man with the spear took them both to the shield, but the weight of Vinicius's arms were too great. The angel got knocked aside out of the air, crashed into the ravine wall again, and fell to knee and shield. But Shir had been right behind him, and she glared daggers through her helmet as she soared straight at Vinicius like a falcon coming straight at her prey.

Her sword sank into Vin's shoulder, and Mia squeaked as the angel came to a sudden stop right in front of her. The sword went through the shoulder, all the way through, and stuck out a half dozen inches from the back of it, straight at Mia's chest. Only Mia's sudden jerk back, spurred by Vin's instant half roar, had kept the blade from skewering her.

They stared at each other over Vin's shoulder. Another eternity, trapped in a tiny moment. The angel's eyes, a shiny green that told Mia's brain 'emerald' with an almost magical specificity, cut into her like daggers. She hadn't tried to kill Vin. She'd tried to kill Mia, and she was going to throw her life away to do it.

The daggers fell away. Shir's eyes faltered, and she looked down.

Before Mia could say anything, Vinicius grabbed the angel with one of his free hands, and threw her to the ground.

"Enough," Vinicius said, stomped on the angel's back, and raked his enormous talons down her back through her armor, earning an ear-piercing scream from the warrior woman.

Noah roared. His blackened wings flapped hard, and the angel threw himself at Vinicius's back. But at this point, it was clear the angels had made a huge mistake. Maybe they'd thought Vin would be a half-starved shell of himself, unable to feed, wounded, and easy prey. But that didn't make any sense. This whole fight didn't make sense.

Vin spun, and his colossal tail struck Noah in the side. Just like the other angel, Noah crashed into the ravine wall before falling to a knee, but some quiet metal clanks told Mia's ears Shir took advantage of the distraction and flapped away. With Vin facing Noah, Mia turned around, and did her best to hold on while looking back at the other two angels.

It was a bloody mess. Vin's talons did more than rip through stone, but armor too, and giant gashes in Shir's armor leaked blood down her legs until small pools formed under her metal boots. Every inch of her trembled, and she struggled to stay standing, sword and shield both swaying. But she held them up them, regardless.

She pointed the sword at Vin. Except, not Vin. She pointed it at Mia again. But the angel with the shield shook his head, and got between Shir and Vinicius.

"They're... not trying to fight you," Mia said. "They're trying to kill me." They already knew that, but seeing it in action was a completely different reality.

Vinicius snarled as he turned his head enough to look at Shir and the other angel. *wWw.N@Vèl@r(m).com*

"Yes, but they will die for it."

"I... I think they know that. I think they attacked you, expecting to die, so they could... kill me."

With a slow, heavy rumble, Vinicius glared down at the angel with the shield, and he flexed his fingers in front of him as if grabbing the air itself. He took a step toward them and reared himself up to his full height. No matter how big the angel was, no matter how massive his white wingspan was, how big his shield was, an eight-foot-tall goliath of muscle and metal was small compared to Vinicius. Very small.

The angel with the t-slit helmet grunted, slammed his shield down in front of him, and spread his wings as he prepared his defense. Attacking was not his strong suit, apparently, but the girl beside him stood ready to do just that, even as her sword arm trembled, and blood soaked the ground under her feet.

"Noah," Vinicius said, and he took a step closer to the other two angels, undeterred by the shield the angel woman stood behind. With a deep chuckle, he looked back over his shoulder toward the man who'd started this battle. "You say the council has sent you to kill the unmarked?"

"You know very well where my orders come from." Noah stood up straight, sword and shield at the ready, despite the blood dripping from the bottom of his helmet. With blackened wings spread wide, he came forward, ready to do battle.

So far, though, the angels hadn't exactly impressed Vinicius, judging from the tone of his voice. But then again, if Vin hadn't known exactly what would happen when Noah attacked from above, Vin would probably already be dead, or at least Mia would have been, blown up by a space laser. And in truth, Vin had only done one angel a serious wound so far, Shir, and much as Vin didn't show it, he had to be in pain. Blood oozed from the hole in his shoulder on Mia's side, and the same for his stabbed hand. The warm liquid trickled down his back and over Mia's feet, and she squeezed the spikes harder at the sight of it.

They'd hurt her bodyguard. Badly. The sight of her bodyguard bleeding ignited fire in her, and she had to fight off the rising desire to embrace the bloodthirsty aura pouring off him. *w(w)W.N@VElw@©m.cD(m)*

"And that's all?" Mia asked. "That's the only reason? Because your boss told you to? You don't know any more?" *wwW.(n)@Vê©WOrn.com*

The angels said nothing. They stood, watched, and planned, looking for a way past Vin to Mia, and even as exhausted as Shir and Noah were, they both re-summoned determination to their eyes.