

This was no good. No good at all. That morning, Seraph had found tracks surrounding his den. Something or someone had found him in his sleep. Who could it have been? A fellow Nightmare, a stray dreamkeeper? There was no way anyone could've found him without following him home. This was no accident and he knew it. He had to move elsewhere, somewhere far from here. With a beat of his wings, he began to rise, looking for an updraft to carry him farther. As he rose, he looked about. The great forested landscape stretched on for miles while a shimmering river cut through the scene. Nothing stood out except a small speck in the distance. It looked to be a camp. *A camp? Wait---*

Pain drove into him as three arrows pierced his side, shock preventing him from flying straight. With an anguished howl, he fell from the sky, trees shattering as he plunged head first into the thicket. His body slammed into the ground, thrashed about in pain as he fought for breath. In the distance, he could here someone approaching. He worked his body to try to rise but another arrow buried itself into his neck. The stranger spoke from a distance.

“ Well what do you know! What do I have here? “

Seraph struggled to move away as he struggled to swallow air. The figure approached calmly, whistling a happy tune. He was a Dreamkeeper no doubt. He wore a coat tied around his waist as he held an odd looking crossbow in his hands. To his side was an small, hard-looking axe. He kneeled down to better look at his catch, adjusting his helmet thoughtfully.

He cocked his head to the side with a satisfied grin.

“ Name's Maxwell. Pleased to make your acquaintance. “

Seraph gagged as he tried to speak, the arrow agitating his throat.

“ No need to introduce yourself. I know quite a bit about you already *Cereus*. “

Seraph was frightened. Nightmares do not fear death, but they do know fear. It's the unfortunate consequence of being bestowed a living vessel. Any living being, no matter how unnatural, fears death, because fear is the best motivator. While Nightmares are immortal, their vessels are not.

He saw no way of escaping, Maxwell was too close, he was injured, nowhere to run, *nowhere to hide*. He saw the Dreamkeeper's eyes, the crossbow...

He was going to have to fight if he wanted to escape.

Maxwell eyed him for a bit, absorbing every detail before chuckling to himself.

“ Well I never...Didn't think your sort even knew fear. Very interesting... “

As Maxwell continued speaking, Seraph looked around the clearing. The forest surrounding them wasn't too dense, leaving just enough room for him to fly through unharmed. The sky was partially cloudy, the sun just reaching its peak. The temperature was warmer on the ground, or was that him? He looked back at the cat squirrel, waiting for the right moment.

“ ...You're an odd one for sure. How about have ourselves a little chase, hmm? I could do with the exercise...”, Maxwell leaned forward a little, using his axe as a pointer, “ I'll be a gentleman and give you a headstart. I'll count to five, and then I'll start alright? Five--”

Seraph launched forward, striking out with his wings and flew into the trees. Maxwell fell back, gasping as he clutched his chest. At least two ribs were broken, a third one cracked. Rising from the ground, he readjusted his helmet.

*“ four, three, two, ONE. “*

*The chase was on.*

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Seraph's vision blurred as he raced through the forest. Something in way he had watched Seraph scared him. This one was different. There was something in the way he acted, as if he's been through this chase before. The way he looked at him, as though he was seeing something else than what was in front of him. Even as he spoke to Seraph, his eyes seemed to be seeking something more as if...

*As if he knew more than he should.*

He grimaced as a nearby tree caught his arrows, breaking them in half, shifting the remains in his side. He had kept going, his hunter has to be on his trail now. His breath grew raspy as the arrow in his throat quivered through the air. He has to pull these arrows out one way or another. Ahead, a wide clearing emerged from the woodland, a massive tree looking down on it. Tucking his wings close, he maneuvered through its intricate inside and exploding above the woodlands. From above, there was no sign of his pursuer. Good, maybe now he can ---

He ducked. A volley of arrows shot through the air, one ricocheting off his horn. Looking down, a halo could be seen on the forest floor. Of course, his power! Dreamkeepers are such unpredictable enemies. Who knows what power he may have?

Seraph whipped around and bolted in the opposite direction, the sounds of pursuit following beneath him. He had to think of something, anything to keep his hunter at bay.

Diving below the canopy, he ducked and weaved, avoiding bursts of arrows flying his way. Cautiously, Seraph began heat Maxwell's body, not overdoing it. If he could keep this chase going long enough, he could send Maxwell's body into heat exhaustion. And from there, *escape*.

As the chase continued, sound of feet pounding the ground grew closer and closer and closer, the hum of a full halo reaching Seraph's ears. With a great leap forward, Maxwell launched himself towards Seraph, crashing onto his back. They skidded against the ground, each struggling against the other. Ratatoskr gripped his back, trying to crush Seraph's spine while the latter flailing about to dislodge his attacker. Their struggle shot them over a steep hillside, crashing through the canopy and colliding with the ground below.

Whipping around, Seraph clawed at Maxwell's head. He threw himself against trees and against the ground. Nothing lessened the deadly grip he was trapped in. In a last ditch attempt, he turned blazing hot. Ratatoskr saw what was happening, but it was too late. His skin had already begun peeling away as he pulled back from Seraph. Suddenly it dawned on the Dreamkeeper. *His body. His temperature,*

*He was being driven into a heat stroke.*

As the air began to swelter, Maxwell realized something else. This was no longer his chase. He needed to head back to camp.

Seraph took this moment to finally catch his breathe. His whole body screamed in pain but he knew this couldn't wait. Gritting his teeth, he pushed his fingers into his side. Feeling around, he gingerly search for the tip of one arrow. Slowly, he followed the shaft until he reached the arrowhead. Using his claws, he enlarged the wound, using his other hand to grasp the shaft. From there he began the grueling process of pulling the splintered arrow from his body. One by one, he removed each one, cauterizing his wounds shut.

Finally he took hold of the one lodged in his throat. It had pierced his throat fully, its barb shaking in the air. Using his heat, he slowly charred the barbed end, shattering it in his grasp. The arrowhead clattered against the ground as he began to pull the other end out. Seraph choked violently as he did this, his stomach lurching. As soon as the arrow was out, he sat still for a moment, shivering from the ordeal. Maxwell was long gone now.

*Good.*

Seraph shut his eyes. He could fly off now. There was nobody to stop him now.

So why didn't he?

His eyes. In that Dreamkeepers eyes was forbidden knowledge. He knew things he shouldn't know. Somehow, this one had seen past his world where the rest couldn't. He had seen into the *human* world. How this one could even have the ability at all to see these boundaries was shocking, though one would think it was bound to happen someday.

Placing his hand around the open flesh, Seraph let heat flush through his neck, sealing the flesh closed. Breathing deeply, he rose to his feet.

At the end of the day, Seraph was still a Nightmare. And he had a job to do.

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Ratatoskr snarled in pain as skidded back down. He should've known something was up. At least his quarry was subtle about it, not that it made him any happier about what happened. *He's a clever one, I'll give him that. It's not like I don't like a challenge.*

Gripping his axe the best he could, He threw his arm back and drove it into the hillside. His arms screamed with pain, anywhere his skin wasn't peeling was raw and inflamed. It was all he could do to simply bend them. This meant that using his axe was out of the question. He had a bear trap, but what use would it be against an airborne enemy? Grasping onto the stone wall, he pulled his axe out. It was almost sunset, meaning that he had to rethink his plan of attack. There was no way he'd make it back to camp at this rate. If he wanted to survive the night, he'd have to lie low, no walking out in the open, watch the skies...

This was going to be tough.

Sinking the axe into the soil again, he pulled himself higher. The hilltop was almost within reach. Just a little farther...wait.

Behind him, Maxwell could hear the faint sound of wingbeats getting closer.

*Time's up.*

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Launched out from beneath the woodland canopy, new energy coursing through Seraph body. *If only I didn't have to do this...*

He shook his head. *Not now. Doubt is the death of Nightmares.* Spotting his target, he flew forward. From the distance, he could see his former pursuer climbing back up the hill. Seraph began to heat Maxwell's body up once more. Lifting him from his coat collar, Seraph took him high above the trees and dropped him down. He watched as the Dreamkeeper

fell to the ground twisting his ankle. He flailed about looking for his axe as Seraph watched from above. Swallowing the lump in his throat, He surged forward above the trees. *Is this how this must go? Who would know if I did not slay my foe?*

*Would it even matter?*

The chase went on for awhile. Every turn Maxwell made, Seraph was was there to turn him back. By this time, Getting back to camp was no longer a viable plan. Maxwell had shifted to focus to reaching the nearby river. His body had already begun entering heat exhaustion and if he didn't do something soon, he could be in very big trouble. His twisted ankle was also beginning swell, potentially in need of medical attention. Through all this, however, Ratatoskr couldn't help but feel hesitance coming from the Nightmare. *What's going on up there?*

It wasn't long until they came upon the river. By this point, it was all beginning to fall into place. Maxwell tried to fight off the cramps and nausea as his body started to shut down on him. He could no longer tell where he was headed as he stumbled onto the boulder besides the river. Unable to do anymore, he collapsed in a sweating heap, looking over the river as it babbled down the rocks and over the distant hills.

Behind him, the Nightmare finally landed. There it stood, watching quietly. Maxwell did his best to look back at creature. What was once a fearful beast looking to flee was now a somber one. It held its head low, almost afraid to approach any further. Maxwell dropped his head back down. He hoped this would end quick and easy...

Something inside of him let go and the heat inside easing out of him. Looking back he saw that the creature was now holding something. A stone maybe? The stone was growing visibly hot as the Nightmare furrowed its brow. With his body cooled down, he made an effort to move towards a lone tree stump for a better view. Once the stone was bright with energy, the Nightmare threw into the sky. With a burst of light, the stone exploded in the air above them as the Nightmare prepared another. Astonished, Maxwell could only watch as it threw another and another. After throwing its ninth one, it stopped and looked back at him. It opened its mouth and spoke its first words since this morning.

*" I...I do not want to hurt you stranger...I-I just want to know...What do you expect...when you pass into that world?..."*

Now there's something he didn't expect to be asked.

" Well...I expect to see a whole new reality. There isn't anything I'd want more than to see it. "

Maxwell shifted positions to better lean on the stump.

“ Though if you don’t mind me asking, Why is it that your sort are always out for blood? “

“ *Why would you want to know that?* “

“ It isn’t everyday I get to talk to a Nightmare. ”

It shifted about uneasily.

“ *...I cannot say...*”

“ Why? “

“ *Because I do not know...* “

All went silent as the wind whistling through the woods behind them. After awhile, the Nightmare sat down, hanging its horned head in exhaustion. The moon slowly rose above the horizon painting the world in a dim light. Together they sat, one hiding his guilt, the other watching the world change colors. Time passed peacefully, until the distinct sounds of landrovers echoed softly from the distance.

Slowly, the beast rose to his feet. With a deep sigh, it looked back, and finally flew off without a sound.

Maxwell didn’t remember much after that. The rovers had arrived with park officials and field doctors with bright flashlights. When they had found him, they tucked into the back of one rover, checking his vitals. After numerous tests and questions, they eventually made their way back to shelter. He quickly fell into a deep sleep thinking about what he’s learned today.

*Nightmares feel fear and Nightmares feel guilt.*

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