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The rider, whoever that was, was decked in enough armor he -- probably a he from the shape -- would have killed a normal horse riding it. Full plate, head to toe, and just as ornate as the goort they rode. Bronze and red, with gold lining the edges, and gold embossed skulls all over. They clutched the reins of the mount with gauntlets, and did not move, their classic medieval helmet pointed straight toward the spire. Two silver horns stuck out from the helmet's sides upward, and while David couldn't see the rider's face from the side, the shape of the helmet told him there'd be a T slit for a visor, or maybe just two eye slits like on a great helm.

So much armor, with enough bulk the rider barely looked human, and could have walked out of some absurd, violent fantasy story. All that was missing was a cape. The rider had two huge axes hooked onto his back, just as ornate as the rest of the armor, with silver blades that had amber lines cutting through them, like veins.

"Who's the rider?" he asked, and made doubly sure his voice was the quietest whisper possible.

Caera spoke first, voice still trembling. "No one knows. I hear stories about him, and how he shows up... randomly. There's no runes about him anywhere that say anything useful, but I heard he got into a fight with the Damall in the Grave Valley a few decades ago. There's a story about him being in Angel's Spine a century before then."

"All I know," Jes said, "is every story about the rider includes demons getting slaughtered. If he's here..." Slowly, she looked David's way. Caera and Dao did the same.

"Fuck." He hit the stones underneath them with his forehead. "Here for me, right? Me, or Mia."

They all looked back to the rider, and waited. But the goort and the rider did not move. With all the armor, it was impossible to tell if the rider even breathed.

"Let's go," Caera said. "We can't--"

More movement cut through the silence, hooves and talons on stone, and the four of them froze stiff. It was sheer luck the sound didn't come from above them.

An enormous pair of red and black wings rose up from around one of the curves of the mountain, coming the rider's way. Before the bearer stepped into view, other demons jumped up first, a couple vrats, one tiger, one gargoyle, and two big brutes. All of them were tiny compared to the demon with the wings.

A tetrad demon, a korgsjin. He flapped his wings once, hard, and used the blast of air to help his jump send him high before he came crashing down, straight onto the rider's position. A colossal beast, bigger than Caera, bigger than Diogo, he slammed into the ground on his hooves, and the mountains echoed with the harsh clang of his black sword striking the stone.

The rider and his goort dodged the sword with a small sidestep, leaving the giant demon landing and hitting nothing but the rough stone of the mountain. The area was mostly flat, enough for the demons to run around and surround the rider, but it didn't look like it'd be easy as that. The rider hopped off the horse, and landed hard, metal armor clanking with heavy thuds that announced how weighty the armor was. He drew his axes, turned, and faced the half dozen smaller demons that circled him.

"Zel will reward me," the winged tetrad said, growling as he bared his fangs at the rider, "when I present her your heart, and your head."

The rider said nothing. The new angle let David see the rider's front, the beautiful engravings and embossed gold skulls on the bronze and red, and how the helmet was actually shaped like a skull. It did have a T slit visor, but no light penetrated it, hiding the owner's face in complete shadow.

Whoever he was, whatever he was, he stood there, both axes in hand half raised out to his sides. It was a very human posture, standing up perfectly straight, but whoever wore the armor had to be at least seven feet tall.

"Gorlus," Caera whispered, "one of Zel's right hands." *www.NoVèLwOrM.CoM*

"Gorlus." David gulped as he nodded. The giant demon, wrapped in black armor and wielding a giant black sword, all so much bigger than the rider, seemed so small in comparison.

"Your heart, for Zelandariel!" one of the other demons yelled. "She'll reward us. She will."

"Reward us!"

"Reward us!"

Gorlus spread his wings, lifted his sword to his mouth, and ran his long tongue along the massive blade, before pointing it at the rider.

"You shouldn't have come here, rider. Zel will be surprised and delighted, and I will taste of your soul."

Caera growled quietly in her throat, shook her head, and leaned in toward David.

"He didn't tell Zel he was going to do this. He's risking his life so he can surprise her."

"Or take the rider's heart for himself," Jes said. "Zel's changed ever since this guy got into her life, him and Saldavin. Fuck him."

David didn't say anything. He couldn't look away from the violence.

The rider ran forward. Maybe if he'd had a spear or a sword and shield, he'd have taken a defensive position, but two axes? David shrank into the stone, and watched, mesmerized, eyes locked onto the armored figure as he ran into the demons.

The demons ran straight back into him. Did they think their demon strength would work? Their size and mass? Or maybe they just wanted violence without a care for whether they lived or died? Whoever the rider was, he was smart enough to take advantage.

The rider ducked under the vrat's sword, and sank his right axe into the demon's stomach. Even from so far away, David heard the impact of the axe getting the demon just underneath the slab of black armor covering only a portion of their chest. And as he yanked the axe out of the vrat's guts, he slammed the left axe down onto the skull of the tiger who jumped straight at him. The tiger hit the ground almost as hard as the rock Caera had dropped earlier. Blood splattered.

The gargoyle and other vrat leapt for him from behind, and both got their claws onto the rider's armor. They were heavy demons, but the rider turned around without issue, and again sank his axes into their bodies with all the finesse of a lumberjack angry with a particularly stubborn tree. They died instantly, each getting the axe in the skull, and through it, down to the *jaw.www.NoVèLwOrM.CoM*

Gorlus was right behind them. How could something that big move so fast? A ten-foot-tall beast on hooves, with wings spread and giant sword in hand, he half jumped half swooped toward the rider again. The rider couldn't dodge the sword this time, and the huge blade hit him in the side. The black blade sung with impact and vibration, and the clank sound echoed through the mountains as the rider fell. The blade had not pierced the armor.

"This is quite the disappointment," Gorlus said, slowly stomping after his prey, his two brutes circling the rider. "You show up again after all these years? I haven't forgotten what you did to me last time."

David looked Caera's way, but she shrugged and watched.

Gorlus and his two remaining demons laughed as the titans closed the distance.

"What's the matter, rider? Old age wearing you down?" *www.NoVèLwOrM.CoM*

The rider said nothing. He didn't need to. The mount he rode turned, and without a neigh or click, charged. Only the clop clop of its hooves warned Gorlus the goort was coming, and he turned to face the horse-like creature. *www.NoVèLwOrM.CoM*

Mistake. The rider got up to their armored feet as if they weighed nothing, jumped high into the air, and without a single grunt or scream, he slashed both his axes down toward Gorlus's back. The huge demon managed to turn around again to face the rider, but that left him open to the goort again. The giant horse crashed into the tetrad's back, and sank its horns into flesh.

Gorlus roared in pain and fury, but it ended with a squelch and crunch, as the rider sank both axes down onto the demon's face. With the demon facing David's direction, the rider blocked his view, but when the rider fell and landed on their feet and knee with a booming thud, David and his protectors all gasped.

Gorlus was dead, and the mess of torn flesh, skin, and shattered bones that were once his face, were on fire. David forced his gaze onto the other demons the rider had killed. Where he'd struck them, their flesh and armor were on fire, too.

The rider, still silent, slowly got up off their knee onto both feet again, and with the same unhurried, monolithic motion, turned to face the two brutes.