

## 1227

For each winged demon above, a demon stood on the ground below. Giant brutes, vrats, a few tigers, a few satyrs, and a few breeds he didn't recognize. Some wore black armor, some wielded big black swords and axes, many went naked and looked eager to use their claws. Above the primary entrance to the spire, upon the lowest balcony, stood a tetrad demon, a hulking monster with wings, giant horns, who stood on hooves and had no tail. He looked almost identical to the tetrad the rider had killed before, a korgejin.

"Saldavin," Caera said, nodding up toward the juggernaut.

Imps and grems scampered around, clicking, screeching, yelling, and hollering with excitement, but they didn't seem to be getting ready for battle. They were getting ready to eat the scraps. They were going to have a feast by the time the day was done.

"This is insane," Jeskura said. "Spire wars almost never happen anymore."

"It's not a spire war," Caera said. "No chance Alessio sent the rider. He's here for..." Sighing, she gestured David's way.

He mirrored the sigh. "For Mia, and me."

"He's only got a couple dozen demons with him," Jes said. "Sure, he's got aera armor, and the lizard, but Zel's got a fucking army with her. He's not going to be able to win this fight."

Daoka clicked a few times before nodding toward the spire, earning sighs from the girls.

"What--"

Jes jumped in. "She said if the rider is here for Mia, this isn't about winning and taking the spire. Hit and run. He's going to kill her, or kidnap her or whatever, and leave."

He grabbed his hair and fell back on his ass.

"Fuck fuck, fuck fuck fuck. What do I do?"

The girls looked between each other before shaking their heads.

"There's nothing we can do," Caera said. "We can't even approach the spire like this."

"We really should have just run in the opposite direction when we saw the rider," Jes said.

Caera shook her head. "You know we wouldn't have been able to get away from the spire and the horde call in time."

"It might have bought us a little time before arriving, if Zel uses the horde call. Maybe we'd have arrived once everyone was dead."

David snapped his eyes to her, but Jes only had a shrug for him.

"I'm not going to let Mia die," he said.

Daoka clicked once as she squatted down beside him, patted him on the shoulder, and peeked around the rocks to look at the spire with her eyeless gaze. But all she had for him was a sigh, too.

"And I don't want to get called for a horde," Jes said, and she poked him in the stomach with her tail. "We're stuck, too."

"We have to sit and wait," Caera said. "Zel might not use the horde summon, if she can avoid it. Last time, it left the whole province pretty shook up. And there's already a lot of demons here, eager to fight, eager to eat the rider and see if they can absorb what makes him so special." Slowly, the tiger pulled away from the rock, and pressed down low to the ground next to David. "Just, wait, okay? Don't do anything stupid."

"Anything stupid?"

Jes gestured to the tiny broken sword that'd somehow appeared in his hand.

"Every demon down there could kill you with a harsh glare, David, and that weird aura of yours won't do anything but make them horny while they do it."

"I--" He wanted to bring up how the aura could do different things. Caera had said so, from that one time they'd gone hunting together. But he didn't get to finish the thought. The chaos began.

The four of them peeked around the curve of stone, up over the shallow ditch, and stared out into the valley. They crawled on their bellies, and risked peeking up over the slope of stone to look out into the madness.

There was none of that. The rider and his group poured forward. The lizard picked up speed, and the ground shook with the weight of dragon feet smashing stone hard enough rocks shattered under its mass. It roared, and David and the ladies all covered their ears as the booming shock wave of sound crashed against the mountains. There was a hiss in there, a lizard-like sound mixed with the extreme bass of a movie explosion.

The sky darkened as a half-thousand demons and a thousand wings took to the air. Thousands more, if you counted the imps and grems, but they scattered like pigeons. Bigger wings blocked out the flames above, gargoyles and bat ladies, hundreds, and they shrieked as they descended onto the battlefield. But they parted when the only male with wings followed after them.

Gorlus, the other already dead korgejin tetrad, had been a colossal titan David had been sure would have fallen like a stone tossed off a roof if he'd taken to the air, and this Saldavin was just as big. But the wings were ridiculous, massive things each the size of his own body if not bigger, and they spread wide as they caught air and slowed the monster's descent toward the head of the lizard. Big as he was, he wasn't so big the lizard couldn't bite him in half, but as the dragon tried to do just that, the tetrad swung his giant sword down, and it crashed into the top of the dragon's snout.

The giant lizard's head fell to the side, and its weight fell with it. Its tail flickered wildly, and another hissing roar filled the valley as a splatter of blood splashed over the ground around its snout. The demons atop the dragon fell off, or maybe hopped off on purpose, and they greeted the oncoming tide with more battle cries. From a distance, they almost sounded like cries of joy.