Chapter 8

Guess We’ll Be Heroes

“We’ll get her home, Syrus.” Cade’s voice broke the uncomfortable silence. “There’s too much depending on a successful quest for me not to see to that.”

 “Not that I don’t have faith in your reckless determination,” Syrus said, “but I’d rest a lot better once we have the girl safely out of our hands.”

 “Rest a lot *more*, you mean?” Cade grinned, taking another stab at his companion. “You’re daft if you think I’d let you return to being a layabout after you’ve proven capable of taking work seriously.”

 Syrus closed his eyes, sending the cave into silence once more. Unwilling to wait for it to break again, Cade set to work running a washcloth through his fur, loosening the debris that had found its way into his coat over the long day. Remnants of his skirmish with Amber, the altercation back in Swenborro, and the less-than-elegant touchdown into the Aridescan Outlands left him by aid of the cloth, the souvenirs of the day’s struggles dispersing in the water.

 “What is it that you so desperately want with that Starstone?” Syrus asked.

 Cade froze, caught off guard by the wolf’s sudden inquiry. After recovering from his surprise, he wagged a finger at his companion.

 “Oh, no, Syrus, I can’t tell you.” He laughed. “Especially not now. Trust me. But fact for fact, I suppose. I’ll tell you this much. Completing that Starstone will allow me to reclaim what Fortune took from me, and I can spit in *her* face for a change.”

 Syrus nodded. “I suppose that’s enough. It at least lets me understand more why you are so ready to bet everything on this quest.”

 “Right.” Cade rose from the water. “Which means we’d better get some proper sleep soon. We’d best be making our departure as soon as we can come morning. Vlakas, you’re not a fish. Let’s go.”

 The weasel exited the bath, beckoning the dragon. Ignoring him at first, Vlakas finally climbed out of the water once his master started walking away, throaty distressed cries echoing off the cave walls. Cade circled back to the other side of the crater where Syrus rested. As soon as he stepped past, the wolf reached back, grabbed Cade’s tail, and yanked back, sending the weasel careening backwards and returning to the water with a yelp and a mighty splash. The water churned with Cade’s scrambling to right himself. After sputtering and shaking water from his frame, he furrowed his brow quizzically at Syrus who stared back at him through lazy eyes.

 “That’s for waking me up at the oasis,” Syrus said.

\*\*\*

 Once Cade returned to the floor above, he called for Daphne who answered his summons to lead him up the staircase and into a hall with a series of doors placed along either side. The vixen bypassed most of them, walking with him to the end of the hall and opening the door on the left.

 “It’s a good thing I don’t house many additional young ones,” Daphne said. “Some of them would be sleeping on the tables downstairs if I didn’t have these spare rooms for you.”

 The room, though relatively small, contained enough space to house three beds, one against each of the walls. A minimal but adequate portion of the floor lay free for walking, extending from the doorway a few feet before being surrounded by the beds. The sleeping accommodations were nothing special and looked to be barely sufficient to contain the weasel’s size. At least they didn’t look to be made of straw. Amber’s diminutive form occupied one of them. She lay in her undergarments, sprawled out on her back, legs spread apart and arm resting across her forehead. Rhythmic, gentle snoring came from her open mouth , and Cade gave praise to Fortune that the sounds she made in slumber were not as loud and obnoxious as she was in waking.

 “I’m sorry I couldn’t give you all your own room,” Daphne said. “The girl you came here with is in the room across from you. I’ll tell your wolf friend to meet you here when he finishes in the basement.”

 “Syrus will insist on rooming with Elysia, I’m afraid,” Cade said.

 Daphne raised an eyebrow. “I see.” Without another word, the vixen took her leave down the hall.

 Cade eased the door shut behind him, careful not to wake Amber lest her rantings rob the entire building of sleep for the remainder of the night. Removing his cloak, he placed it underneath the bed before wrapping Vlakas up in the makeshift blanket before laying down on his own. He stared up at the ceiling, proposing a plan for the morning’s departure in his mind. Unaware of how the day had left him, he did not notice his eyelids fluttering. They closed without him realizing, and within minutes, sleep took him.

 *“What do you think you’re doing? Get up.”*

 *The voice was male. Soft. It carried an essence of meekness even while giving its command. Cade’s eyes flickered open to ubiquitous evergreens against a dreary overcast sky that heralded the coming rain. Rapid thudding of steps against the earth reached his rousing senses, and the scenery soon became a backdrop to the top half of a figure leaning over him.*

*The horizontal pupils of a goat peered down at him amid two eyes of differing hues. The left carried the same bright blue as a crystalline lake while the right matched the dark brown of the forest ground. A dull blue hood lay draped awkwardly over his head, the cloak unfasted to accommodate two mature horns. Both eyes squinted, the goat’s face scrunching in disappointment.*

*“Heh, sorry, Athan.” Cade’s voice sounded different to his ears yet still familiar. “Just getting a little rest.”*

*Athan’s hand extended toward him. “You can rest after we find what we’ve trekked out here to find. By my estimates, it won’t be long before we’re standing over the ruins of Galgath.” The goat’s voice picked up over the course of his final sentence, ending with increasing excitement in every successive word.*

*Cade allowed Athan to pull him up, chuckling at his companion’s fervor.*

*“This is no laughing matter.” Athan held up a finger at the weasel before walking away to consult a journal that lay near a large haversack. The book boasted a striking deep blue cover with a relief of some manner of dog with a scroll in its jaws. The fanciness of it looked quite at odds in the company of mere Fjordren commoners. He rambled on, flipping to marked pages with his left hand and scanning the handwritten notes. “We could be the first in Fantasia to uncover the hidden capital city of an extinct race. Imagine what could be learned about the Necromancers from those ruins. Culture. History. Architecture. Magic. Secrets kept from the rest of the world. There must be something there that …”*

*Cade matched Athan’s words as the goat finished. “…can be of benefit to the improvement of Fantasia.”*

*“I’m serious.” Athan shut the book and returned to Cade. He held his right arm out diagonally in front of him with fist clenched, eyes locked with the weasel’s with a mixture of resolve and pleading. “I need to know I can count on you.”*

*Cade scoffed, extending his own right arm in the same gesture so that it struck Athan’s as if they were clashing swords. “You already know you can, mate.”*

*Athan’s serious face gave way to a slow smile followed by a nod. Disengaging his arm, the goat turned and paced away from Cade before stopping as if to take in the surrounding Fjordren landscape. His body quivered with excited laughter. “Shouldn’t be more than half a day’s travel. Think about it. The two of us finding what no one ever could.”*

*“I won’t lie. That would be a grand feeling. A discovery for the ages. You and me.”*

*Athan’s body went rigid, frozen for an eerie length of time. Cade’s fur bristled, but it wasn’t owing to the chilling Fjordren air. Slowly, the goat reached up and removed his hood, letting the cloak tumble off his body to lie limp in the soft earth.*

*“It would, wouldn’t it.” Athan said. At the sound of his monotone, Cade’s body shook along with the ground as tremors threatened to force him down. Amid the growing violence of the earth, Athan stood still as if unaffected by the shaking even while trees sunk away, swallowed by the land.*

*Finally, the goat turned to Cade. The fur on half of his face lay ripped away, replaced with bone and congealed, rotting flesh. Empty darkness within his left eye socket bore into Cade’s very soul, the umbral depth threatening to completely swallow his nerve. When the nightmare spoke, its voice echoed with a sinister ring, cold and hollow as an empty grave while the ground beneath Cade’s paws crumbled and gave way.*

*“Shame you let me die.”*

 “Screw off, kid, unless ya want me ta shove the whole bleedin’ hilt up yer scathole!”

 Amber’s shrill screaming rescued Cade from the nightmare’s grasp. Eyes shooting open, he sat up, withdrawing a dagger from a strap fastened around his waist in. His racing heart and heavy breaths eased over the passing seconds upon seeing Gabe kneeling beside Amber’s bed with his hands held in front of him.

 “I-I came to tell you that breakfast is waiting for you down in the main hall.” The young deer swiveled his head from Amber to Cade and back multiple times throughout his sentence. “On my oath, I wasn’t looking to steal your blade. The sword caught my eye, and I only wanted to get a better look at it, I did.”

 Amber grabbed Gabe by the collar and pulled him close, glaring at the boy with teeth bared. “I don’t care if yer a child, king, warrior, beast, or milk-guzzlin’ infant. No one touches it but me!”

 “Calm yourself, Amber.” Cade rubbed at his face, banishing the nightmare to the past as had become routine over the past three years. He stood, sheathed his dagger, and freed Gabe from the fox’s grasp. “Syrus and I could barely lift it back in Jahrrko. There’s no way this kid or anyone can steal something they can’t carry.”

 “Don’t touch me,” Amber muttered, lying back down and rolling on her side to face away from the others.

 “Don’t worry, kid,” Cade said. “Amber’s just extra cranky because you woke her. She needs to wake up on her own before she can be expected to be pleasant.” He turned to Amber. “Isn’t that right?”

 The fox responded with a lengthy string of unintelligible muttered rantings, refusing to move.

 Cade retrieved his cloak after nudging Vlakas awake. Leaving Amber to her moodiness, he and Gabe headed across to the room that housed Syrus and Elysia. Cade gave the wood two firm knocks, and Syrus’s voice responded from within, granting them entry. Inside the room, Syrus sat on the bed facing the door, cross-legged and rigid with Kairi joining his vigil of the entryway, perched on his shoulder. His cloak hung pinned against the wall with two daggers, stretching across like a crude curtain. No sign of Elysia.

 “Where’s the kid?” Cade asked.

 Syrus indicated to his cloak. “I thought it time she received some proper garments.”

 Elysia soon emerged from behind the makeshift partition, no longer wearing her oversized amethyst robes. Instead, she shared the same attire granted to the other orphan girls. While more fitting to her frame, the dull green trousers remained baggy by design, and the mouse fidgeted with the front of her white blouse, trying to force the garment to accommodate the spike jutting from her chest.

 She scrunched her face up, inspecting her new outfit, “Mister Syrus, I don’t like these clothes. They’re dull.”

 “But they’ll make it easier to move,” Syrus said. “And if there’s danger, you will be able to run without risk of tripping.”

 Elysia returned to wrestling with the blouse. “Why do I have to run? You’re supposed to protect me, right?”

 “Well, yes, but…”

 “Good morning, miss Elysia,” Cade interrupted. “Did you sleep well?”

 Elysia smiled at him, nodding, before noticing Gabe and waving at the new face. “Hello. Who are you?”

 “Oh, well, my name is Gabreeloch, but everyone calls me Gabe.” The deer scratched the back of his head with an awkward smile. “Aridescans seem to have a hard time pronouncing southern Fjordren names.”

Cade patted Elysia on her head, relieved that she bared no grudge against him for last night’s mishap. “Gabe told me that breakfast is awaiting downstairs. Why don’t we go attend to that?”

 “Oh, yes, thank you.” Elysia ran past him, giving a quick look in Gabe’s direction to express her gratitude as soon he too was left behind. Cade opened his mouth to speak to Syrus when Elysia came barreling back, almost knocking into him upon return. Scampering behind the cloak, she rummaged around before emerging, toting the Purple Mage headwear in hand.

 “I’m keeping the hat, Mister Syrus,” she said while racing out of the room again.

 Syrus exhaled heavily, dismounting from the bed. “We’d best go after her.” After gathering his equipment, he dismissed himself.

 “What’s all this about protecting the girl?” Gabe asked, sticking to Cade like an extra tail. “Are you guys on an honest quest?” His eyes grew wide, and his voice rose in volume, enthusiasm spilling forth. “Are you in a Guild? Tell me everything.”

 “Slow down, kid. Let me see what’s what in the way of breakfast first. I can regale all you like while we have a bite.”

 The main hall bustled with activity. Any orphans not dashing about tending to chores instead busied themselves with plates of food as conversation mixed with the clinking of cutlery. A small stack of thin, circular skillet cakes occupied each plate accompanied by a spread of berry paste preserves created from the fruit harvested during the wet season. The cakes came from a skillet resting in the fireplace attached to a rod used to withdraw the utensil from its position over the flames. The heat worked to prepare the treats from what started out as a liquid batter consisting of ingredients mixed with Pakra milk. Each kid seemed responsible for making their own meal, the only exception being the significantly younger children who lacked the strength to wield the cumbersome cooking instrument.

Over a plate of his own food, Cade informed Gabe about his current mission, telling of Elysia and her curious circumstances, the mysterious spike, and the note she came with. He made sure to give prolonged attention to the most impressive parts as he filled the young deer in on the quest up until the present.

“Seas and skies!” Gabe said in rapt astonishment. “You really climbed your way out of your dragon’s throat? And that Ranger! Not even the dark can hinder him from finding his target! Is the fox really that strong? You guys are incredible.”

Cade’s grin could not leave his face if he wanted it to. Gabe’s admiration did well to feed the weasel’s pride far more than the skillet cakes satisfied his stomach.

“Don’t pay ‘im no mind,” a young male cat looking to be around the same age as Gabe said. “Gabe gets stars in ‘is eyes every time a Guild passes by.”

“Careful, Gabe,” a younger child said, one of several who had repositioned themselves so that they could join in as audience. “I’d bet my next breakfast that less than half of all that’s true.”

Cade scoffed. “I hope you don’t mind going hungry tomorrow. Go on, ask Elysia over there how we met. Or Syrus how his bow got broken.”

Gabe’s ears stood rigid. “His bow’s broken? Oh, no, no. A Ranger’s only as strong as his bow, he is.” Before anyone could object, Gabe bolted from the table and toward the fireplace. He took up a lyre that hung from a rack along the wall before dashing back to where Syrus sat.

“Take out your bow for me, please,” Gabe implored the wolf. “Do you have it with you?”

Syrus eyed the young deer before presenting his useless weapon from underneath the table. “I was going to fix it, young one, no need to worry. Any Ranger worth their Gold knows how to adapt to things like this.”

Gabe focused on the snapped remains and placed his fingers against the lyre’s strings. “I’m sure you can, but why not let me handle it? It would be an honor to be of assistance to adventurers as great as yourselves, it would. Nothing a little Vivace can’t fix.”

Taking a breath, Gabe closed his eyes and started plucking the delicate strings, letting the soothing, high-pitched notes fill the hall. A faint light glistened around the ends of his digits as he strummed, growing into a gentle gleam. Kairi’s high-pitched *skree* joined the lyre’s song as the bird’s fiery feathers shifted to a bright blue.

Upon the seventh and final note, the light faded from his fingertips, and the pieces of Syrus’s bow took on the radiance instead. Vibrating in a subtle dance on the table, each segment snapped toward each other in an instant, connecting to where the breaks occurred. A small flash of light ran along each crack, and Syrus’s bow rested on the table looking identical to how it appeared the afternoon prior.

Elysia stared at the bow, open mouth fit to catch flies. “How’d you do that?”

Syrus took up the weapon, testing the durability and function by drawing the string back with the same force as he would in combat. The wood flexed without issue.

“He used magic,” Syrus said with a growl, removing himself from the deer’s presence, withholding any appreciation.

“No worries, young one.” Cade moved over to Gabe and patted his shoulder. “Syrus and magic don’t get on well together. Don’t let that get you down, though. That was quite impressive. One with any aptitude for magic is a rarity in these parts.”

Gabe ran a hand through his hair, grinning while keeping his eyes to the floor. “I’m not particularly good at it, I’m afraid. I can only perform three other spells. My parents, er, before they…” he cleared his throat, before continuing. “My parents were Bards, you see, and we traveled the different kingdoms, visiting taverns and singing of great adventures and legends for coin. Everything I know I owe to them, I do.”

From across the room, one of the younger children called out in a boisterous rally. “Now that you have that lyre, can we have a song?”

Cheers of agreement came from the other orphans.

“Yes, please?”

“It’s been so long since we heard you.”

“Do it, Gabe.”

The young deer moved his hand through his locks a second time, an awkward smile gracing his face as he turned to Cade. “I guess you’re getting a meal and a performance this morning, sir.”

Gabe walked across the room to the fireplace, the lyre hugged against his chest. Taking a seat on a barrel, he positioned himself as all eyes in the room watched. He pondered for a moment before lifting his head to address his audience.

“This is a song so old it lies almost forgotten. Only us Bards ensure its survival. I give you The First Song.”

He started on the lyre, producing a tune and establishing the steady rhythm before commencing with his song. The deer’s voice carried an impressive quality to it that far exceeded the abilities of a novice and complemented the instrument perfectly.

*Praise to the Eight, the origin of Song.*

*Each of their own will yet swirling as one.*

*Composers of all and all that will come.*

*We sing to Melodia, the Mother of All,*

*Who’s will birthed all life, creatures great and small*

*In your loving arms wounds and pain are all healed.*

*So caring yet fierce as the lightning you wield.*

*To fiery Bolero these words we impart.*

*Your flames fuel our passions, igniting our hearts.*

*Woe unto those who against you trespass.*

*For who can escape from your red scorching wrath?*

*To the beautiful Strathspey, we sing to please.*

*Without you we wouldn’t know the oceans or seas.*

*King of all creatures who in water reside.*

*At your command the waves rage or subside.*

*With strong Molinukai, who can contend?*

*Your might and your stamina both know no end.*

*Only you hold the power to grant health to the land.*

*Raise your spear, Molinukai, and make mountains stand.*

*Praise to the Eight, the origin of Song.*

*Each of their own yet swirling as one.*

*Composers of all and all that will come.*

*Hark, fickle Baroque, so wild and free,*

*The winds change their courses to fly where you lead.*

*Also called Fortune, your gales grant as you will*

*Portions of fate both of blessing and ill.*

*To fearsome Dirge we show our respect,*

*For your hands hold the reigns of destruction and death.*

*Time gallops forward all by your design.*

*All pasts and all futures you weave intertwined.*

*Oh, kind Diesirae, you chose to create*

*A home for those at the end of their fate.*

*Judge of the wicked, you count every deed,*

*And haven to the worthy for eternity.*

*And all-knowing Canon, so caring and wise,*

*What inner feeling or future can hide from your eyes?*

*Like the beasts of the earth, we all crawled without choice*

*Until your bestowed light gave us freedom and voice.*

*Praise to the Eight, the origin of Song.*

*Each of their own yet swirling as one.*

*Composers of all and all that will come.*

 “Now, wasn’t dat lovely, mates?”

 A raspy new voice disturbed the momentary silence that followed Gabe’s final notes, carrying a sneer that soured the beauty of the instrument’s sound. Three reptilian figures stood in the doorway accompanied by one of the orphans previously working outside with the Pakra. The young canine kept his head low and shuffled about in speechless apology.

 The reptile in front performed a sluggish mockery of applause while stepping forward, mouth stretched by a mocking grin showcasing the fearsome teeth within. The tall, lithe lizard’s scales carried an ashen hue with black stripes running along the arms and back. A bright red splashed around the eyes, lower jaw, and throat, reminiscent of blood among bones. Two small horns jutting out above each brow only added to the barbaric presentation.

 “Dis kid has a real talent, doesn’t he?” The reptile swaggered forward while his tail, equipped with savage spines along the dorsal side, swished idly like a threatening lash.

 Gabe glowered at the newcomer from his seat as the reptile’s companions sniggered in response.

 “Guess we’re interruptin’ somethin’ big this time, Rhodin,” one of the cohorts said. A burly yet rotund individual, he sported vicious black spines jutting out over his body, even along his substantial abdominal region. “No kid’s ever sung for us before.”

 “Right ya are.” The leader moved past Cade with a haughty stride without sparing the weasel a glance. “Least they had the decency this time ta offer us some food, meager as it might be.” Rhodin snatched a plate from a young rabbit and, without slowing his approach to the fireplace, dumped the contents into his mouth. The robbed orphan stood up, flinging her eating utensil at the scaled scoundrel.

 “That was mine. You want food so badly, make it yourself.”

 The reptile stood in place while a hush fell over the room. In a blinding motion, the lizard spun around, delivering a savage backhand across the girl’s face. The small rabbit stumbled back before the force became too much and she struck the floor, clutching her face and curling up into a wailing heap.

 “Kids today,” Rhodin muttered to himself, “no concept of respect.”

 “Jasmine!”

 Gabe tried running to the fallen girl, but Rhodin gripped his arm with a cruel force that threatened to bruise. “Git da fox, whelp. Ya know why we’re here.”

 The young deer winced as the reptile’s claws delivered fresh cuts into his arm. He looked past his oppressor to Jasmine who sat tended to by a couple of the older boys. Blood ran from the rabbit’s nose, staining her pure fur and blouse. Gabe glanced at Cade, silently begging him to do something. As if to answer his prayers, the weasel stood from his seat, addressing the reptile.

 “Hey, scale trousers,” Cade said, causing Rhodin to swivel his head in his direction. He kept his hand near his sword hilt as he spoke. “If you are capable of any civility, I implore you prove it to us by sending another of these kids to fetch Daphne. The one in your grasp, I’m afraid, would be much better suited for fixing this mess.” He indicated the wounded rabbit as Rhodin’s elliptical eyes glared back at him.

 “And who are you supposed ta be?”

 “Just a traveler passing through,” Cade said. “I think the bigger question here is why one kid isn’t as good as another to bring you some old fox.”

 The third reptile, a short green specimen with long arms and a short snout, spoke up. “Just let ‘im be, Rhodin. Makes no difference, ‘n’ this jabberin’ is just wastin’ time. Lord Kajo won’t appreciate us bein’ late…again.”

 Rhodin snarled, releasing Gabe. “Fine, Kheedra, ‘ave it yer way.” He pointed to another child. “You. Get dat old witch.”

 As the cowering orphan raced off to do the lizard’s bidding, Gabe reached the injured Jasmine. Blood still flowed, though slightly diminished.

 “Hold on, Jasmine, I’ll have you fixed up soon, I will.”

 Gabe strummed the same tune on his lyre as when he fixed Syrus’s bow. The end of the song brought on the end of the bleeding, and Jasmine’s tears slowed as her pain vanished. The rabbit embraced the Bard, whispering her thanks. After returning her affection and sending her off, Gabe addressed Cade, keeping his voice low.

 “Why don’t you teach these sand snakes a lesson?”

 “I suppose that would be the heroic thing to do?” Cade said.

 Gabe nodded but the weasel dashed his hopes with a shake of his head.

 “It would also reek of foolishness.” Cade kept his voice just above a whisper. “Without Amber, we’re outnumbered. Spurring a fight in this enclosed space would put the kids in danger as well as reduce our mobility. Look at Syrus. He probably longs to slip a dagger into long-and-ugly over there for what he did to your friend but thank Fortune we both have a good head on our shoulders.”

 Cade glanced at the two lizards near the door who stood chatting amongst themselves before looking toward Rhodin. The lead reptile paced the floor with incoherent, aggravated mutterings escaping his lips. Deeming the reptiles too preoccupied to hear him, he spoke to Gabe again.

 “If the time comes, we’ll be heroes.”

 “The old broad makes ‘er grand entrance.” Rhodin’s voice filled the room once the kid returned with Daphne in tow. “I was startin’ ta think you was tryin’ to avoid us.”

 “Enough of your sarcastic hissing,” Daphne said. “What does Kajo want from us this time?”

 “It’s *Lord* Kajo, fox. ‘N’ lucky fer you, it’s nothin’ more than yer quarterly dues. You can just leave the ten thousand Gold with Kheedra or Goshira, ‘n’ we’ll be movin’ out.”

 Daphne’s eyes widened and she stepped back, her open jaw twitching as she struggled for words.

 “Ten? Ten thousand? I can’t spare that! The quarterly is only five thousand.”

 Rhodin placed a hand on Daphne’s bony shoulder, and the elderly vixen clenched her teeth in response to his wicked grip. “I know, but ya see, Lord Kajo’s been hearin’ rumors that you ‘n’ yer whelps are doing quite well for yerselves. Ya like to pass yerself off as poor souls when ya been hidin’ yer success from everyone.”

 “What are you talking about?”

 *Crack!*

 Rhodin brought his tail down on a nearby bench, splintering it in two. Aside from Gabe, the remaining orphans scrambled in all directions to put distance between themselves and the room.

 “No more lies, fox,” Rhodin said through bared teeth. “Yer provisions are all produced right ‘ere. Nothin’s costin’ ya fer food. Don’t think Lord Kajo ‘asn’t ‘eard where Theosis ‘n’ other cities be gettin’ their Pakra. Not ta mention the pretty coin ya snatch from those pathetic enough ta take these children off yer hands. Rather nice system, ain’t it? Would give ya respect if I weren’t so sickened by yer deceit. Yer lucky ten thousand’s all that’s being asked.”

 Daphne’s face hardened. “I don’t know where you heard this, but Kajo is mistaken. I cannot afford to pay that.”

 “Lyin’ witch.” Rhodin roared in the vixen’s face, slowly poising his tail for a strike. “Payment ain’t a choice. Consider Lord Kajo’s protection retracted.”

Three things occurred nearly simultaneously. The sound of a whistle pierced the air. Rhodin initiated his strike. Kheedra and Goshira shouted a warning to their leader. All culminated in a snarl of pain erupting from the reptile’s throat.

Vlakas stood on all fours, grown to a match the size of a large feral canine. With Rhodin’s tail between his teeth, he wrenched back, trying to take the lizard’s appendage for himself.

“Yeeeeaaargh, what in the many hells?” Rhodin stared at the dragon, lost for words if not for his profanities.

“Apologies, my fine leathercoat.” Cade stepped with confidence up to the interlocked reptilians, hand on hip near his sheathed blade, while Daphne seized her opportunity to slink away. “You see my dragon is rather empty in the head and must have mistaken your impressive tail for a plaything. I tried summoning him back, but I’m afraid you can’t always reason with simpletons.”

Rhodin aimed his bloodshot eyes at him. “Mangey cur!”

Savage claws swung down, seeking to tear into Cade’s face. The weasel’s longsword flickered out of its scabbard, the steel meeting with Rhodin’s palm. Though the reptile’s scaly hide provided natural armor against the blade, a thin trickle of blood crept from the lizard’s flesh and along the edge of the weapon.

“Guess my point has been made,” Cade said, leaping back to dodge a second swipe.

Cade’s ears perked, catching rapid, lumbering footsteps against the wood behind him. He spun to the left, narrowly missing Goshira’s massive fist that swung for the back of his head. Following close behind the immense reptile, Kheedra pursued him with a pair of circular blades only to have his efforts rewarded with a blocked slash followed by a paw to the chest that sent the small lizard tumbling back.

Cade scrambled for the high ground of a nearby table’s surface, taking a moment once up top to wink at Gabe. “Right. Guess we’ll be heroes.”