

Chapter Ten: A Rude Interruption - Part One

Evan's entire body had tensed. He gripped his broadsword, squeezing his tension into the steel handle.

A surge of hot energy rippled through him, tingling his skin. A familiar throbbing sensation pounded in his head—a darkness he had denied for some time. In any other circumstance it would have caused him concern, but right now, for the first time, he felt like embracing the dark energy.

He measured the merchant, and the adlaz with him. The reptile men wore sleeveless vests and brown trousers with heavy boots. They were taller and broader in the shoulder than the adlaz species he knew back home, but they shared a similar scaled skin and rounded heads on long necks. He cared not for whatever their species were on this planet.

The tallest adlaz carried a long metal staff. Beside him, a green-skinned one carried a large wooden hammer with a long handle. The smallest adlaz, still clearly over seven feet, carried a curved longsword.

"Apologies for the interruption," the merchant said, his smooth voice feigning politeness. "I thought we could join you fellas. Sparring, are we?"

"We have no business with you," Sam told him. Though his voice and expression were neutral, Evan could see the tension in his posture.

The confident man shrugged as he stepped closer, raising his golden sceptre with the gesture. Glistening rubies lined the curved top of the sceptre, with a large pointed emerald on the tip. The wide top bent into the thinner curved handle, giving it a slight S-shaped form.

"Aye, you're right there, friend," the merchant agreed, coming to a stop. "But I have business with you."

One of the adlaz snarled. His wide nostrils reminded Evan of a serpent, as did his multi-hued eye slits.

The merchant gestured to Evan. "I don't want no trouble. Just want your little friend there."

Evan tensed. He had sensed the man's desires in the tavern, although he did not realise the full extent of his determination.

Evan's father had always seen the best in people—it was what Evan admired about him the most when he was growing up. King Goodheart's assurances that narrow-minded folk were just misinformed and ignorant had lowered Evan's guard earlier, but he would not make that mistake again.

In this case, dear Father, your teachings have proved false, Evan thought solemnly. An enemy stood before him. One who wanted to enslave Evan.

Sam took a step forward. "Don't know how it works where you're from, but around here you can't just take someone you want."

The merchant nodded, twisting his mouth thoughtfully. "Perhaps I didn't introduce myself properly earlier. The name's Audlin Yalsune, as I mentioned. A merchant of exotic wares... is my way of saying that I'm a hunter. Been through just about every crevice and darkened cavern around the whole of Medropon, have I. Come across many intriguing trinkets. Take this one, for example."

He raised the golden sceptre. "Found in the skeletal hands of an ancient Tol Sehjaavi demon. One of them Anointed ones. Unless you wanna see what kind of tricks this fella can do, I'd suggest you do as I tell you."

Sam remained standing still, watching the man closely. No one spoke for a moment.

"You know," Audlin said, his stance relaxing. "I never did finish my story. You see, after my mamma was killed, it was just me and my papa."

"You killed him," Evan cut in, watching him closely. "And you vowed never to let anyone get in the way of what you wanted."

The hunter stared at him. "Good guess."

Evan's eyes remained locked on him. "Slitting your father's throat in his sleep was the act of a great coward."

Audlin had tensed, his expression frozen with confusion. He looked pathetic.

Evan leered at him, enjoying his confusion.

"Last time before this gets messy," Audlin said, regaining some of his composure.

"I think we understand each other," Sam said. He widened his stance. "Come and get him."

Audlin's serious look turned into a broad grin. He pointed his chin at them. "Boys."

The reptile men raised their weapons and approached.

Evan dashed forward. His restrained aggression released as he met the nearest foe, the stout hammer-wielding man. He ducked under the swing and readied an attack. The second blow came fast, missing Evan as he dove to the side and rolled on to his feet. He sprung forward again, but the hammer swung out, keeping him back.

"Come on, then," Even cried out, his voice breaking with emotion. "You heard the man. Come and get me." His frustration manifested itself into a breathy growl as he looked for an opening of attack.

Behind the adlaz, Evan made eye contact with Audlin. The man's cocky grin brought a rush of anger over him. He just had to get through this foe and he could deal with that man.

To Evan's side, Sam battled the sword-wielding enemy, the two of them clashing and countering in a rapid succession of strikes.

Ahead, James blocked a swinging staff, faltering and then steadying himself.

The next staff swing sailed past James's head, almost throwing him off balance when he ducked.

His heart raced when he prepared his sword for attack, telling himself it was still just training; hoping the thought would ease his nerves.

The mukk grunted and fiercely swung the staff. James brought his sword up to intercept the staff. His body jolted with the impact, but he was surprised at how easy it had been to block the attack. The mukk's large chest heaved under his loosely buttoned vest.

How did this happen? He was just meant to have a casual training session. Now he was up against an enemy that wanted to hurt him? Maybe even kill him? He shook his head and willed himself to focus.

The mukk was slow, showing his attacks by the way he pulled the staff back first. James ducked under his next swing and pushed forward, bringing his sword down against the staff, hoping to knock it from his hands. The staff jolted in the Mukk's hands but he maintained his hold and stepped back to give himself room to swing the weapon again.

That gave James an idea, and he realised that close-combat would be better than giving him room to swing that staff around.

He jumped back as the staff struck the ground at his feet. He knocked it away when it shot back up and spun on his heel. His sword bit into the mukk's shoulder, sticking for a second before he pulled it out with a grunt. The mukk roared and stumbled back, blood pouring from the wound.

Adrenaline pushed James forward, a surge of confidence guiding his actions. He swung out again, anticipating the block that came, and his next strike sliced a line across the mukk's broad chest. The cut was shallow, barely tracing a thin red line over his scaled skin.

Clashing weapons drew James's attention. He turned to see the sword-wielding mukk pushing Sam back with heavy blows. Sam was faltering, and sweating profusely, as he

blocked and ducked under the attacks. He was weakening, James realised, from his injuries. From the grillock attack that James could have prevented.

The mukk before him readied his staff. A surge of anger rushed through James. Angry at his own weakness. He charged at the mukk.

Rearing his sword back for a heavy blow, James swung and just missed his opponent. The force of the swing threw him off balance and he fumbled sideways. He saw the staff swinging towards him, but couldn't find his footing in time. The staff collided with his injured shoulder and sent him to the ground with searing pain lancing through his arm.

James rolled away from the mukk, his vision blurring and world spinning as he attempted to focus. Rising onto a knee, grimacing and sweating, he saw Evan facing the mukk with the hammer.

James frowned, his muscles tensing. He tightened his hold on his sword and faced his enemy.

The adlaz approached Evan, snarling, his thick lips curled to reveal pointed teeth.

Evan knew he had to dispose of this enemy before he could get to the huntsman. Another pulse of energy went through him, but he refused to open himself to the darkness trying to break free. Now when the moment had come to unleash whatever lay inside him, he could not bring himself to do so. He would dispatch his enemies with his own abilities.

Pre-empting the hammer swing that came down, he dove to the side, rolling and diving again. The adlaz's open shirt flowed around him as he turned and continued to try and flatten Evan.

As he rolled, Evan focussed his mind into a singular purpose. Gusts of wind gathered in his wake, spiralling around the adlaz and building up to a strong whirlwind. Diving and rolling again, Evan intensified his energy and channelled the wind into the adlaz, lifting him off his feet. The adlaz landed on his back, the hammer falling by his side with a loud thud.

Evan rolled onto his feet, blinking back his focus and fighting the dizziness in his head. He stepped to the fallen adlaz and raised his sword.