

The warm winds of midday brushed against Arkris' bruised and tired body as he trudged down the main road of Calbridge. The sun shone at its peak, warming the cobblestone streets under his feet. The scents of garlic, ginger and roasted beef wafted through the air from the many taverns and market stands. It was a welcome change of pace from the dusty roads and hostilities of the last three months.

The streets bustled with people going about their day. Merchants and locals haggled prices over pottery and vegetables, children played with sticks and stones carved into crude playthings, and horses pulled wagons loaded with goods in and out of the city. The city itself was a constant river of activity, but the flow parted when it reached Arkris, and the reason was plain. He stood a head taller than most men and had the distinctive features of a Tektysi; a long snout full of sharp teeth, a muscular tail, horns sprouting from his head, and a covering of silver scales. His feet were large, three toed, and clawed, and his legs bent backwards, digitigrade like a dog or bird, letting him stride down the street at a faster pace and creating a small 'thump' with every step he took. In a largely human city, he was a dragon amongst men.

Arkris looked at his arms. His journey raked several new scars into his scales. Jagged cuts and deep gashes to add to his collection. He reached into a pouch at his side to remind himself what the wounds had been worth. He ran his fingers along the smooth, crystalline chunk. The shard pulsed in his grasp, filling his palm with a strange warmth. Such a small and seemingly insignificant sliver, and yet in the right hands it held the power to overwhelm armies. Another step towards justice. Another step towards revenge. For himself. *For us.*

Arkris' stomach growled and his scales itched for cleaning. Dust coated his parched throat. Dirt specked his tattered traveler's threads, cloak, and leather pauldron. He yearned for a

filling meal, a hot bath, and a fresh set of clothes, but comfort and recovery could wait. He had to get the shard to the city's stronghold.

Fortunately, the main road led directly to the Riverkeep. It was efficient city planning, but Arkris had always found it foolish. What architect would design a city such that an enemy could go straight from the gates to the keep? It made all the more sense to make the main street wind and twist, to make an invader struggle for every inch of ground they took. Not to mention, the buildings lining the main streets were still roofed with thatch. It hadn't been difficult for the previous rooves to catch, and when one caught ablaze, so did the ones around it. It was no surprise to Arkris that Calbridge had nearly been captured years ago. *You should have fallen. Fallen or won total victory. Then I wouldn't be here.*

Within a few minutes, Arkris reached the Riverkeep. He had to admit, although the main road would be a besieging army's dream, the Riverkeep was another matter. Sat directly at the convergence point of the Callai River and the Alonso Tributary, there were few points of attack and no need for a moat. The rivers created a natural barrier, surrounding the keep and splitting the city into three parts. Two stone bridges, tall enough to let small merchant ships through, linked the embankments on either side of the rivers to the keep. The only option for an army to reach the keep without crossing one of these chokepoints was along the same landmass the Riverkeep sat on, crowded with the brick-roofed multi-story buildings of the minor nobility. Perfect for defenders to bore slits into and harass invaders with spears and arrows.

The Riverkeep itself was one of the finest works of stone Arkris had seen in all his travels. An initial ring of walls, the outer curtain, surrounded the main stronghold, dotted with towers and crenulations for defenders to loose arrows from. The inner curtain wall sat closer to the end of the embankment, where the central keep rose high above the waterways, its peaked

towers able to survey all activity upriver, downriver, and on either embankment. Something about sturdy towers and stone walls set Arkris at ease.

Arkris approached the oversized main gate where two guards stood on either side. A fat one stood on the right side, his hauberk uncomfortably taut around his stomach. A wiry guard stood on the left, skinny as the spear he held. Arkris didn't recognize them, they must have been assigned in the months he was gone. He walked towards the open gate leading into the outer ward.

"What's your business?" the pudgy guard on the right said, rushing to put himself between Arkris and the gate. He had to tilt his head up to meet with Arkris' eyes.

"My business is not for your ears. Let me in." Arkris said, attempting to step past. The fat guard stepped with him, blocking his way.

"You're not getting in, Tektysi."

Arkris scowled. "I have matters to attend to within the keep."

The guard smiled smugly. "Is that so? And what matters would those be, scaleback?"

"Matters more important than gate duty."

"Very funny. You think you're a clever little iguana, huh?" the guard turned to his accomplice at the other side of the gate. "Hey Staton!"

The wiry guard, Staton, had been watching the interaction from his side of the gate. "Yea, Bil?"

"We've got a funny lizard over here!"

"A funny lizard, eh?" Staton walked over. Dirt caked the sides of his cheeks, and his mouth hung open while he breathed. "What's the joke?"

Bil snickered. "It thinks we'll let it in. Ain't that funny?"

Staton grinned from ear to ear. “Now that *is* funny.”

“Are you going to step aside?” Arkris said.

“Maybe.” Staton said. He ran his finger along the coarse-grained wood of his spear and inspected it for dirt. “What’re you doing in our city?”

Arkris growled. This was the kind of obstacle he hated most, the kind his shortsword couldn’t cut through. Or at least, the kind it shouldn’t. “I was hired by the Lord of Riverkeep.” A lie, but not entirely false. These two fools wouldn’t know the name Branda Wilobery, and the Riverlord wanted it that way.

“You? Hired by Lord Borion?” Bil said. His fat jowls jiggled as he snorted.

“You must think I’m some kind of idiot if you think I’m letting some Tyrant-loving lizard get even a whiff of the same air the Riverlord breathes.” Staton said, leaning on his spear.

“I do.” Arkris said. Staton’s grin dissolved into a frown.

“You were right, Bil, this one thinks it’s funny. I’m not laughing anymore, lizard. You know my pappy was at the Battle of the Twilight Fields? Your monster killed him, and I’ll bet you’re here to help finish what it started.”

“I was a boy then.”

“So was I. It don’t make us any less players in the game. So what’s that monster sent you here to do? Steal our secrets? Poison our wells? Kill our lords?”

“Shoot, he’s gotta be one of Iscarion’s scouts, Staton.” Bil said, squinting at Arkris. “Just look at that lyin’ mug. You can’t trust nothing that’s got scales.”

“I am no servant of Iscarion.” The name tasted sour on Arkris’ lips. His heart flared with rage. How dare they remind him of the Tyrant’s name? Every fiber of his being yearned to throw

himself at them. *They're not worth it*, Uncle would've said. *Don't let them make you the monster they think you are*. But Uncle was dead, and these ignorant fools aligned Arkris with the killer.

Staton glared up at Arkris. "I been around the stables a few times, I think I know horseshit when I smell it. That turncloak whipped you lizards into good lil' slaves."

*Uncle's words be damned, I've got my own lesson for these two*. Arkris snarled and stepped forward, grasping the leather handle of his shortsword with his off-hand.

"Say it again if you believe it."

Staton glared up at him. "I said," he leaned in close, his breath reeking of onion. "...you're nothing but a Tyrant's slave!"

Arkris roared, shoving Staton into the cobbles. Bil darted forward, waving his spear ineffectually at Arkris while Staton pulled himself back up. Pathetic.

"Shit, it's an angry lizard!" Bil cried. Staton leveled his own spear at Arkris.

Arkris remained still, his firm grip ready to draw his shortsword at the first hint of action. He bared his teeth at the two guards, their spears rattling in their shaking hands. Arkris could see the fear in their eyes, their tense stances. These two idiots had never seen combat.

Arkris lurched forward, startling the two buffoons before abruptly halting. His feint worked. Bil and Staton stabbed at Arkris' chest in frantic discoordination. With a swift sidestep, he dodged the two spears and grabbed the shafts with his free hand. Drawing his blade in a reverse grip, he hacked the ends of the spears off in a single fluid stroke. The metal points clattered to the ground. Arkris slid his sword back into its sheath, still gripping the shafts of their spears. He yanked hard on a spear shaft, causing Bil to lose his balance and stumble towards him. Arkris slammed his elbow into Bil's nose with a sickening crunch. Blood dripped freely down Bil's face.

“Gentlemen, gentlemen!” a tiny voice called from behind the guards. “It’s a perfectly fine day today. Let’s not sully it before supper.” Skunch slipped in between Bil and Staton and placed himself at the center of the altercation. Like Arkris, no man could confuse Skunch for a human. His Hyopsid heritage was plain as the whiskers on his face. He stood three and a half feet tall, nearly half Arkris’ size. Coarse fur covered his body and short muzzle. He was fragile, even for his size, and dressed himself in fine threads that failed to hide his round frame. *A rat in noble’s clothes*. A bronze amulet hung from his neck. Silver inlays engraved the image of a river passing under a stone bridge. A seal of the Riverlord. *Why was I not given one?*

“Arkris!” Skunch said, placing his tiny hands on his hips. “We saw you approach from the keep. I hope these gentlemen didn’t delay you.”

“No— I was... showing them where my loyalties lie.”

“I see. And it seems you were teaching them some proper forms.” Skunch said, picking up the spear tips on the floor. He offered them to the guards. “I believe you dropped these.”

Bil and Staton stood slack-jawed, staring at the finely dressed mammal holding the shattered pieces of their weapons. Bil took the spear tips, having to stoop down to reach Skunch’s hand.

“...thank you.” Bil managed to mutter, his voice nasally from the broken nose.

“Now, it appears your equipment is faulty. I’d advise heading to the armory and fetching yourselves some new spears. We wouldn’t want Lord Borion or Lord Corlance seeing you in such a state, would we?”

Staton and Bil huddled up. They grumbled unintelligibly in harsh tones, Staton jabbing his finger on Bil’s chest. After a few moments, Bil sulked away from the post and disappeared around the gate, leaving a trail of blood from his nose. Staton feigned a smile.

“He’ll get us some new weapons while I man the watch.” Staton said.

“Good man,” Skunch said. “Now come along Arkris, Branda is waiting.”