

The occupants of a rather shoddily constructed Tavern froze as a Presence made itself known. Not that they'd been particularly ambulatory to begin with, but to be fair, that wasn't their fault. Nor could the fact that the Tavern only had two walls and no roof—and that the two walls it did own were mere cardboard—be blamed on the barkeep.

"I've located another one," declared the Presence. "You leave immediately."

"I am ready," declared the Mage, who had been drinking while standing on account of his waist's lack of flexibility. "My staff is yours to command," he added, raising it as evidence.

"Of course it is; it's fused to your hand," jeered the Cowboy.

"That in no way decreases my loyalty to the cause."

"I suppose not," agreed the Cowboy. "Well, I'm ready to serve, too. You have the aid of my whip."

"And my hooves," added the Cow. "Or, if we find ourselves lost on our mission, gripped by starvation, my beef."

"No, there shall be no eating of party members," declared the Presence. "We are *civilised*."

"Yup, nothing more civilised than starving yourselves to death when there's perfectly good beef right in front of you."

"There will be no starving to death, either! Seriously, why are you like this?"

"It's my function. Look, I have this little hatch that you can open, and ribs come out."

"... I think we can do without you on this mission. Let's have the bear take over."

"Rarrw," roared the bear, who was actually rather soft and fluffy, with a head far too big for his body.

"Does that make me the Bearboy?" asked the Cowboy.

"No. That's not how it works."

"How does it work, then?"

"You're the Cowboy because you have the cowboy boots with the spurs, the hat, the lasso and the whip. A cow is not actually a required part of proceedings. No, wait, why am I even answering this? Let's get back on track. I have located another of the foul *things* that dared injure my mother. Let us depart, find it, and make it suffer."

"Ooo, are we going to give it the hairdrier again?" asked the Mage. "I do like the way they melt when given the hairdrier."

"... I'll see," answered the Presence. "Mum told me off after the last time and took it off me. Apparently she doesn't want it used as a torture device, however deserving the target."

"Aww."

And so, suitably cajoled, the Bear, the Cowboy and the Mage set off to exact vengeance against a most deserving target. The Tavern was abandoned as the mercenaries set forth on their trek along the dusty road.

... Well, not that dusty, given that it had been vacuumed the day before. Like so many other things, the dust needed to be imagined.

And, as the mercenaries reached the end of the road of imagined dustiness, they encountered their opponents. The protectors of their target.

"Oh, great, it's the Dinosaur again," sighed the Mage. "Must you always get in our way? How are you even alive? I'm pretty sure we dropped you into a lake of lava last time."

"That was not me, Dinosaur. It was Dinosaur, my identical twin brother," roared the Dinosaur.

"He's just bitter because his arms are too short and stubby to reach his mouth, so he can't join in the drinking at the Tavern," explained the Cowboy.

"At leasssst he hassss armsssss," hissed the Snake, slithering up to join the Dinosaur.

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"What?" asked the Mage.

"And he's just bitter because the barman can never understand him."

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◆■⚡ℳ□◆☞☞☞■⚡ ◆ℳℳ ☞□◆," sighed the Alien. "☞□◆ ⚡□ℳ◆ ◆ℳ☞☞
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"Rarrw!" answered the bear, slamming the Alien with a soft and fluffy paw, which did about as much damage as might be expected.

"Hah. It sssseemsssss your bark is worssssse than your bite."

"Quiet you," demanded the Mage, raising his staff as he prepared to unleash the primal powers of the cosmos upon the bitter ranks of his enemies. "It's not his fault he has no teeth. Besides, neither do you."

The Snake hissed angrily.

"Right, time to pull my weight," declared the Cowboy.

"What, about a hundred grams?" laughed the Dinosaur.

"A full one hundred and fifty!" exclaimed the Cowboy as he angrily launched himself into the air, landing neatly on the Dinosaur's back. "As long as you include my accessories, anyway."

"Oh? Would you like to include your box, too? Inflate your numbers a little more?" taunted the Dinosaur as he tossed and bucked, trying to throw off the Cowboy.

"No, but I'll include my boot in your face."

"That doesn't even make any sense. If you're going to throw around insults, at least... argg! My eye! You kicked me in the eye!"

"Why are you acting surprised, you dumb brute? He literally *told you* what he was about to do," said the Mage. "Also, **Meteor Swarm.**"

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☞■☞□□ℳ☞☞ ☞ ◆ℳ⋈■& ☞□◆ ○ℳ☞■'○ℳ◆ℳ□□⋈◆ℳ'," said the Alien.

"Is he saying anything important?" asked the Cowboy.

"Buggered if I know. Bear?"

The giant Bear swiped again, this time catching the Alien with an uppercut and yeeting it clean out of the field.

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"Bah. The Bear stole first blood," complained the Cowboy.

"Stop talking as if you've already won!" retorted the Dinosaur, desperately scrabbling to reach the irritating Cowboy on his back, but failing miserably, given his stubby little arms. "Argg, get off me!"

"Why ever would I do what you told me to?"

"Because you're a fundamentally merciful person?"

The Cowboy stopped to consider that, then jabbed his spurs into the Dinosaur's other eye.

"Arggg!" screamed the Dinosaur.

"No, I think that, actually, I am not."

"I can't see! I'm blind! The bugger *blinded* me!"

"Hey! Watch out for the..." shouted the Snake, but didn't quite finish the sentence before the Dinosaur fell off a conveniently placed cliff.

"Bye-bye," called the Cowboy, somersaulting off the Dinosaur's back, landing neatly on the cliff edge and waving downwards in the general direction of the descending scream.

"You will pay for that..." declared the Snake.

"Are you not forgetting something?" asked the Mage.

"I don't think sssssso. Why?"

The Mage didn't answer, simply pointing upwards where a million tonnes of flaming rock were descending rapidly.

"Oh," said the Snake. "Yesssss, it turns out that I did, indeed, forget..."

The million tonnes of flaming rock impacted. For some reason, this didn't vaporise the Mage, Cowboy or Bear.

"Rarrw!" said the Bear, with feeling.

"Yes, they were, weren't they," agreed the Cowboy. "Well, whatever. Let's get a move on."

The trio of mercenaries continued along the (not) dusty road, travelling until they reached the Saloon.

"Should have known our target would be hanging out here," sighed the Cowboy.

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◆☼ℳ ☉☉□□■ ✕◆ ◆□ ◆☼ℳ ☼☉❖ℳ□■?" asked the Alien, who was embedded into one of the two walls, his head poking through like some sort of hunting trophy.

"Him again? You batted him in the wrong direction, Bear," sighed the Cowboy.

"Just ignore him," said the Mage, pushing open the Saloon doors. "He can't do anything; he's stuck up there."

His eyes met those of the barkeep.

Both pairs of eyes narrowed.

"I don't want no trouble..." said the barkeep, reaching under his bar for the boom-stick stored beneath.

"How convenient. Neither do I," replied the mage, sparks leaking from the tip of his staff.

The Bear forced his way through the Saloon doors, demolishing the entire wall in the process, then brought a paw down on the barkeep.

"Uh..." said the barkeep from the floor. "What about him?"

"Bear *always* wants trouble, friend," declared the Cowboy, nonchalantly walking in behind. "But how about you hand over our target, and we'll do our best to ensure that Bear's violence is directed in a more deserving direction."

"... Sounds great," agreed the barkeep from beneath the Bear's paw. "What you're looking for is in the room at the back."

"The room at the back, huh," echoed the Cowboy, seemingly unconcerned about the ambiguous instructions. "In that case... Open sesame!"

Not having the Mage's talent for the mystical arts, his magic words were accompanied by a far less magical kick, his trusty boot battering down the door to the hiding place of their quarry.

"And here it is," declared the Cowboy, staring at a red cuboid thirty-two millimetres long, sixteen wide and a touch over ten tall. Upon its top were precisely arranged eight cylindrical bumps. "The enemy of our employer's mother. Let us destroy it."

"Rarrw!" exclaimed the Bear.

"Indeed," agreed the Mage. "That an object so small could injure one so great. Such a thing cannot be permitted to exist!"

"Henry! Tea time!"

The Bear, the Cowboy and the Mage froze.

"Two minutes!" shouted back the Presence, who was apparently known as Henry.

"No, now. Otherwise it'll go cold," replied the mystery voice, accompanied by the squeaking of a door. "... Are you melting lego bricks again?"

"... No?"

"And are you lying again?"

"... Maybe?"

There came a sigh. "It's sweet and all, but you really don't need to get so worked up just because I stepped on a lego brick. Now come down for tea. You can finish your revenge later."

"Okay, Mum..." answered the Presence, before departing. The door clicked shut.

"I guess this means we won't get to see the hairdrier?" sighed the Mage once they were alone.

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