

VII Unmasked

They chose to follow the road that led to the north, from Magwul. True that they could run into more of those masked men, mercenaries or whatever they were, or perhaps even friends of the slavers. It was for this reason, that they remained off the road, simply keeping it in their view. But, as they were guided into the swamp, they really had no idea how to get out, and the road was their only hope to civilization.

Neither Lido nor Coren had ever been this far away from home, and were none too familiar with the path they were taking, or if their path was indeed the right one. And as their journey went on, their doubts only thickened.

“The sun’s in front of us now,” Coren complained. “That can’t be right.”

“I think when we tried going around that hill, it was shaped funny and we got turned around.”

“But which way was the hill?”

In their spinning confusion, they had lost track of which direction they had come from.

“Well, I think...” Coren’s words cut off when he saw Lido drop to a crouch and put his finger over his lips. Coren slowly lowered himself to his knees, lost his balance, and fell into the mud. But he was too scared to pull himself out of it. “What did you hear?”

“I’m not sure,” Lido answered, peeking his head over the brush. “I think there’s an animal back there.”

“Like a squirrel?”

“It looked bigger.”

“Like a bear?”

“Like an alligator.”

Coren's eyes grew wider than his head, but he remained on the ground, carefully immobile. "What's it doing?"

"It's just waiting there."

"Tell me when it goes away."

Both boys remained motionless, though uncomfortable. Lido's knees were starting to hurt, and Coren could feel something slimy crawling up his pants.

"Achoo."

"What was that?" Coren asked.

"I think it sneezed."

"Do alligators sneeze?"

"How should I know?"

"Achoo."

"Bless you," Coren called out. Lido gave him a stern look, but Coren simply shrugged. "Now we'll know."

"Dank you," a voice called back.

Lido and Coren's heads popped over the brush, coming face to face with a meek looking Rork, crouching futilely in a neighboring bush.

"Gwe followed you."

After being led back to the road, Lido and Coren were finding that Rork was a helpful companion to have. A natural woodsman, Rork could find them food, show them short cuts, and he could read the land like no one else.

Their path was fraught with rain as they traversed the forests north of the swamp. They had left the road now, as Rork assured them he could bring them back to the mountains safely.

And it was true, for as they traveled, the swamp began to dry out, the trees were thinning slightly, and they could make out the tip of a mountain in the distance. The boys were confident. They were close to home.

But something else marked the landscape now. A lone tower, bright white, at least thirty stories tall, thin and elegant, stood in the distance, in the middle of a large empty field.

The boys were heedless to approach it, but Rork wouldn't leave the cover of the trees.

"What's wrong?" asked Lido.

"Da Tower ov Impala!" Rork shrieked, stepping backwards now. "Oh no, oh no... gwe wendda wong gway. Muz durn bwack, now now now now now." He cowered behind a tree as he spoke, decided it wasn't safe enough and cowered behind a bigger one, farther from the looming tower.

He turned and starting running full speed back the way they came. "Muz durn bwack. Wong wong wong wong wong." Coren caught up and tackled him to the ground. Lido approached and stood over him.

"Rork, it's ok. We'll go around. There's no need to turn around now."

Rork was beginning to calm down. He tried to crane his neck past Coren to see the tower, but couldn't. As long as it was out of his sight, he was fine.

They made their way back deeper into the trees, to keep Rork blinded from the terrifying monument, and began making their way east through the swamp. Lido fought back feelings of frustration for their guide and what he thought to be an irrational fear, but once Rork felt that they were far enough away, he finally revealed what he knew about it. It was a story neither Coren nor Lido had heard before, but to the Mydian, it was burned into his heart.

Rork's knowledge on the subject was based on a few different sources. Legends, rumors, hearsay... for ages, the Mydians knew that the Tower contained the greatest source of evil imaginable. At the beginning of the world, there were many people who lived happily. But

some of them were affected by greed, and wanted to rule the others, so they joined together, not just as a team, but as a body. Plant, animal, man, they combined their bodies together with dark magics and became an entirely new creature, called the Impala. The Impala learned evil magics and ran throughout the land, stealing, murdering, and enslaving the rest of the creatures.

Soon they decided that they couldn't take it anymore, and the rest of the living creatures came up with a plan. The Impala had ordered a tower built in their honor, from which they could rule their land. But, in secret, some of the other creatures had learned magics, and reversed the spell on the Tower. When the Impala entered, they could not escape. The door could only be opened from the outside.

When the Impala learned of their deception, they became furious. They pounded on the door so viciously and angrily that it created the canyons and the mountains around the tower. They swore that if the door was ever opened, they would seek their revenge on every living thing in the land.

“Sheesh,” commented Coren. “I can see why you're so afraid of that thing.”

Unconsciously, he took a few steps away from it.

Their detour had put them back into the swamp, and on top of that, it began to rain again. For hours they trudged a muddy path.

But soon enough, the trees were thinning out again. The swamp hadn't ended though. They had come to a canyon.

“I don't remember crossing this on the way over,” Lido remarked. “Rork, are you sure we're going the right way?”

“Yeah! Straid do da moundins.”

Coren added his insight. “You know, we probably crossed it when we were in the wagon.”

“That makes sense, we are pretty close to the mountains now. But how do we cross? There’s no bridge.”

“Gwe zwim! How long gwan you hold your bref?”

Lido and Coren looked over the edge of the cliff. The river was anywhere between really far below and die before you land, and they had no intention of climbing that slippery, sharp rock face on the other side.

“We need to find the bridge, Rork,” Lido urged.

Rork took Lido’s hand and pulled him closer. “Nah, loog, id’s easy. Jus glose your eyes n’ tage a dive.”

After a carefully worded explanation about the differences between Mydian and human anatomy, Rork was finally convinced to find an alternate route, but, he added, “You guys’s no fun ad all.”

They followed the canyon north, and finally came across the bridge, a massive structure constructed from a wood lattice, leading all the way across the ravine.

It wasn’t too far beyond the bridge that the boys caught their first look at the mountains, and that’s when the real disappointment set in.

Coren was the first to notice it, then Lido. Rork just smiled happily.

“Loog! Da moundins!”

“Those aren’t the right mountains,” Coren whispered to Lido.

“I noticed.”

Kameryn awoke to the familiar crackle of a fire. The glow was a blur at first, digging its way through the tiny opening in his eyelids, but he could soon see the outlines of the flames as they wove their path towards the sky.

“Awake now, eh?” said a voice. Across the flames, Kameryn could barely make out a face, though dimly lit, it appeared worn and rough.

“What happened?” Kameryn asked, his voice a withered squeak.

“From what I could gather, you decided to take a nap in the middle of a crater. I’m glad I found you before someone else did.”

“Was that Twelve?”

“Yeah,” the man solemnly replied. “That was Twelve.”

“What happened?” he repeated, not having been satisfied with the first answer.

“There were men,” the raggedy man said. “They came and ravaged the town. Claimed to be looking for a girl. Didn’t find her, obviously, so they looked harder.”

He thought of Lido and Pollen, the masked men that chased them through the streets... that girl. This was all for Merci. But how did they find their home? Kameryn was beginning to feel uncomfortable. The blankets were too hot. He jumped from his covers, stumbling to his feet, realizing for the first time that they were in a cave. “How do you know all this? Who are you?”

“Just a beggar, passing through.”

“Why didn’t you do anything?” he accused. “How could you just stand back while they ripped apart the town and everyone in it?” He scanned the area for his weapon, realizing it had been removed from him. “Where’s my sword?”

“Calm down, kid. Remember, I saved you.”

“Where’s my sword?” he repeated, again seeking satisfaction.

“It’s right here,” the Beggar said, motioning to a stalagmite with Kameryn’s belt attached to it. “It looked pretty uncomfortable on you; I’m surprised you’re so eager to get it back.”

Kameryn didn’t answer, he simply grabbed the sword and began to wrap it around himself again.

“You’re the Lind boy, aren’t you?” the Beggar asked.

Kameryn sneered at him, a combination of anger and confusion. “How did you know that?”

“You look just like your brother.”

“You knew my brother?”

“I seem to remember a young man, wild hair, short temper... he wore a sword like that too.”

Kameryn was almost caught up in the nostalgia, but couldn’t imagine his brother with a sword... the only image he could conjure was the painfully poised portrait of Frim, dressed to the nines like a Serkan noble, a tableau arranged by their father. That portrait hung for years over their fireplace, a shrine of silver plates and jeweled chalices surrounding it.

The young boy’s face tightened into a scowl. “You’re a looter!” In an instant, Kameryn’s hand was at the sword’s handle, but before he could pull it, the Beggar had him pinned, one hand on the sword’s guard, holding it in place. The other in a fist, leading the arm attached across Kameryn’s torso. Kameryn wriggled and spit beneath the Beggar’s grasp, blindly and involuntarily groping for his blade, but the raggedy man was tough, and would not let this take place. Between rounds of swatting Kameryn’s hands, the Beggar had removed the blade entirely, and held it away from Kameryn’s reach. He dropped the boy to the floor.

“You’re no beggar... you’re a thief.”

Across the cave floor, the Beggar tossed the sword into the dirt and returned to face Kameryn, keeping his body between the two. “You’re smarter than you look kid, but trust me, I didn’t come this way simply to rob a ransacked village.”

“You’ve been to my house... where’s my family? What have you done to them?”

“Your father was out looking for you when the attack came... I believe he booked a room at an inn in Foothills. He’s still looking for you, you know.”

Kameryn's vision locked into a small portion of the cave wall. He watched the shadow of his fist bound from wall to wall of its fiery prison. He stared through squinted eyes, imagining his hand became something more than itself, a snake, whipping around, warning that it would carelessly devour anyone that came near. "And my mother?"

The Beggar didn't answer, he seemingly shook his head and shrugged.

"Take me to my house," Kameryn ordered, his eyelids so tightly wrapped around his irises that they began to drip simply to lose pressure.

"I will," the Beggar answered, "on one condition."

Kameryn stared at the older man, his vision blurred by tears. "Anything."

"The sword stays here."

Though it was in direct conflict with what remained of his soul, Kameryn obeyed, and let the Beggar guide him, unarmed back to the charred remains of his former home. The sun burned brightly on the western horizon, lightly touching land, as if it were balancing on it. Though Kameryn could not perceive the dangers himself, the Beggar was very cautious to stay in well-hidden spaces, dashing between the sanctuary of a charred fence or scattered furniture like a cockroach. The landscape was completely foreign to Kameryn, though his guide maneuvered as if following a map. Before long, they came to the only landmark Kameryn could recognize.

Being the largest building in town, "Lind Manor" as it was known would have been easily been the largest pile of rubble. Yet, it stood out as the only building that remained relatively intact. This twist was not immediately apparent to Kameryn,

With no heed to his well-being or safety, Kameryn dashed through the rows of brick chimneys that stood alone amongst a sea of charred ashes, past the fence that used to mark his yard, and straight through his front door.

The scene inside broke Kameryn's heart. The house where he grew up was torn to shreds. Keepsakes, mementos, and gifts were strewn across the ground, whatever precious metals or jewels they may have been adorned with stripped off. In the fireplace, the torn canvas of that painting of his brother, Frim, removed of its gold-trimmed frame, singed around the edges by whatever embers remained from the last fire the family burned together.

"I didn't want you to see this..." the voice behind him murmured.

The blood in Kameryn's body burst from his heart, carrying with it little packets of hatred for the man who robbed his home, took him in, and had stolen his sword. He thought of his last remaining object of value, sitting in that dirty man's cave. The blood ran through his fists, igniting his knuckles into a rage, before racing back to his heart for more anger.

He ran at the Beggar with the fury of a hurricane, but the perception of an earthquake. "You! You did this..."

Without much effort, but still annoyed, the Beggar held the boy's attacks at bay. "I already told you, kid, it wasn't me. I didn't get here first..."

Through their altercation, neither combatant heard the horses approaching outside; the armored riders dismounting, or the clamor of boots marching up the stoop.

The door burst open, a line of gold and silver armor seemed to bathe the room in light as the soldiers entered the home.

Kameryn removed himself from the Beggar's defensive hold and shot an accusing finger back. "This man looted my house. Arrest him."

In a fluid motion, the crowd of soldiers wrapped themselves around the raggedy man, easily confining him between their ranks. As a continuation of that same movement, another hand of soldiers held Kameryn as well.

"Not me..." the boy squirmed. "Him. This is my house!"

“Your house?” cooed a familiar but haunting voice. The soldiers did their best taking to the walls in order to allow a line of space from Kameryn straight to the door, where a glimmering silhouette entered. This last soldier was adorned in much keener arms; the insignia that lined his pauldrons and gloves were just that much more ornate than the others. From a dazzling gold broach, affixed to his helmet in a most unnatural way, a single black plume emerged, tickling the ceiling, a feather Kameryn had seen several days before, in the marketplace, atop the hat of a masked man, who led a group of mercenaries to abduct a princess.

“You live here?” the man repeated. If he recognized Kameryn, the present situation was no indication. “Is there a vault somewhere? Perhaps a key to a storehouse or remote shed?”

“I wouldn’t tell you,” Kameryn snapped.

It was obvious this man had no ear for argument. With a strike across Kameryn’s face as pompous goateed men of this nature are prone to do, he simply repeated the question, “Is there a vault somewhere? Perhaps a key to a storehouse or remote shed?” with no change of inflection or pace.

A man broke through the crowd of soldiers, a very large man that Kameryn also recognized. Not only recognized, but knew. It was Sergeant Gorrum, a man who had escorted him home on many occasion when he had been in a fight, or been caught stealing. A man who was always sure to list the many legal ramifications and actions he was obligated to take against the boy, before returning him to the stern discipline of his own father. Gorrum approached the feathered poof, and whispered something in his ear.

“Major Curro, it’s possible the patriarch took whatever valuables he had with him when he fled.”

“Ah,” the officer mused, “of course.” He turned back to Kameryn. “Where is your father? This isn’t... him. Is it?”

Curro, of course, was gesturing to the Beggar, an assumption that made Kameryn wish his hands were not being held so that he could force himself to vomit. “You’ve got to be kidding me.”

Reaching out, Curro put his thumb and forefinger directly beneath Kameryn’s cheekbones and lifted the boy’s face uncomfortably upward, as if the lack of attention was the reason he was not getting the answers he sought. “Where is your father?”

“He doesn’t know,” the Beggar answered, marking his introduction into the conversation.

A look of shock covered Curro’s face, as if a chair had spoken to him. “Pardon...”

Before he could finish his well-spoken sentence, Kameryn had wrestled loose from the grip of his aggressor, grabbed a piece of a broken lamp from the ground, and had it at Curro’s throat in a heartbeat. “I’ll hear no more words from you,” he snarled through clinched teeth.

Before anyone else could react, the Beggar had also broken free of his captors and had his hands around Kameryn’s wrists, pulling them away from the officer’s neck and letting the porcelain dagger fall helplessly to the ground. “This isn’t the way.”

Curro let out a tremendous laugh at the scene before him. “A pacifist, eh? Can’t stand the sight of blood, hmm?”

“Shall we question the vagabond?” Gorrum inquired.

“No.” The Major made a quick visual observation. “I doubt you’ll get much from him.” He turned and made his way to the exit. “We’re finished here.” Before disappearing through the door, he made one final signal with a pompous wave of his hand, “Burn them.”

It was the abruptness, and not the words, which confused Kameryn, as his hands were bound behind his back and he was tossed onto his knees, unable to stand immediately. The soldiers evacuated the home in a quick, fluid motion, leaving behind the stammering boy and the raggedy man, fumbling to their feet.

Scrambling to return his hands to the more comfortable side of his body, Kameryn rolled off the floor and over to the front door, which, of course, had been bolted shut. He began pounding as the room began to fill with smoke, and it was then that the words finally hit him. “Burn them.”

The heat didn't stop him from expending as much energy as possible while the room grew to an intolerable temperature. He pounded on the door until his body felt compelled to take to the ground.

When the smoke cleared and the ashes of what was once Lind Manor settled, a boy and his weathered companion emerged from the stone chimney, sooty, but unburned. Tossing his shackles to the ground, the Beggar instinctively returned his lockpick to whatever hidden pouch he kept in his sleeve, before looking back at the sullen boy, hands bound together around his waist, crumpled over in the charred heap of his former life.

“Why didn't you let me kill him?”

“Killing is never the way. Besides, if you had killed him, they would have killed you. Simple as that. Now they think you're dead. You have a much higher chance of living.”

“What have I got to live for?”

“I could help you get to Foothills, find your father-“

Kameryn stood and faced the fireplace that served as their sanctuary. His heart wanted desperately to ruminate about the nature of greed, how one possessed the ability to destroy so many lives in order to raise his own status slightly. But all he could think about was his sword, his beautiful sword. He reached into the coals, grabbed the remains of the painting of Frim, rolled up the canvas as gently as he could and tucked it into his belt.

“Did you know this?”

“Know that the Faction did this? There’s a reason I had you leave your sword. I wasn’t sure how to tell you.”

“I would like my sword back,” he said as he returned to the Beggar.

“You can’t take on an army, kid.”

“I don’t plan to. I just need to take on one.”

It was dark in the swamp now. Having been told his mistake, Rork was eager as ever to correct it. He assured them that they were near the edge of the swamp, and the next morning, he would take them to the other mountains.

They were hungry, especially Coren, and as everyone knows, a hungry Montan is a dangerous one. He went after the first edible looking object he saw, a bright yellow fruit hanging from a tree, and pulled it down.

“Stob!” Rork yellow, agilely grabbing the fruit from his hands. “Nod a good idea.”

Rork placed the fruit the ground, picked up a rock, stepped back, and threw it with all his might at the ground. The rock punctured the rind, the fruit’s yellow juice shooting forward, spraying against the trunk of a nearby tree, which sizzled and withered under the strange liquid.

Coren shrugged. “I’d still eat it.”

“Don’t bother,” Lido offered. “Bork packed us some soup.”

Rork picked up the scary fruit’s shell, and placed it in front of Lido. “Here. You gan warm id up wid dis.”

“How long do you think that’ll take?” Coren asked.

“Jusd a bid,” Rork replied.

“I think I’d better take care of something first,” Coren admitted.

His request was slightly curious at first, but as Coren walked away, he grabbed a few leaves and rubbed them against his arm to see how soft they were, and the others had an idea of where he was going.

The soup had begun bubbling already, to Lido's surprise. He dumped it into three bowls and saw that the smell must have drifted far as well, because Coren was already running back.

"Everything all right?" Lido asked, concerned.

"There was a... is the soup ready?"

"Yeah..."

Coren grabbed the bowl and took a few scoops before speaking again.

"They found us," he finally said calmly.

Lido shot a glance toward Rork, who immediately dashed up a tree and skittered the direction Coren came from.

"Da slabers," Rork gasped as he dropped down next to Lido. "Gwick, gwe need to escabe."

Coren dropped the empty bowl to the ground. "Right," he said, wiping his mouth.

"Don't leave the bowl there," Lido snapped. "They'll find it."

"Good point," Coren called out, reaching out his hand as the brush broke, spewing forth a team of slavers. With a hefty net, they covered the Montan boy and swarmed around him, futilely attempting to bring him to the ground.

"Coren!" Lido called out, rushing to his friend's aid.

But before he could reach him, a large, dirty body slid in front of him. A pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around Lido as a hideous wind snapped orders. "Shut up," Lucien hissed, tossing Lido to the ground and pulling his sword at the same time. "You, Montan, stop resisting or you'll see your friend's intestines."

Coren, who at this point had managed to get out of the net and wrap it around two of his aggressors relented, dropping his stance and turning to face the scorned man, allowing the men around him to pull their swords and have them at his throat.

Lido put an arm under himself, ready to lift, but was shot down quickly by Lucien Den's boot. "No tricks this time, boy. You tell me where the skuds went or I start chopping off ears."

"Leave them alone," Lido uttered, barely a whisper, but all he could manage with the weight of the man on his lungs.

"What?"

"Leave them alone. They're not yours."

"I choose what's mine!" Lucien shouted, lifting his sword.

Lido prepared for the stinging sensation that he imagined a sword wound felt like. He had never felt what it was like to have a foreign object thrust between his organs, or experienced the pain of being separated from a body part he had spent a lifetime taking for granted. However, the pain never came, not for Lido anyway.

With a shriek the slavemaster attempted to pull the sticky, burning yellow liquid off his face as Rork, freshly alit from the treetops above, held the shell at ready for another attack. The horrid smell of burning flesh stunned the minds of every nose it entered, but feeling the fight or flight rush of a frightened animal, Coren quickly burst from his sharp cage and ran at Lido, helping his friend off the ground.

They turned to face Rork, who was deftly dodging Lucien's blows, the aggressor half-blinded by the juice, and still covering the wound with his free hand. "Run, fwends, run!" the Mydian urged. Lucien's cutlass swung at him, barely missing his face.

Rork ducked another two swings before losing his acidic weapon. Panicked, he ran for the nearest tree and began scrambling up, but not before Lucien, finally removing his hand from his face, revealing the hideous mess of flesh and bone left, put the strength and dexterity of his

body behind his sword, and chopped deep into the lizard. Rork made it to the top of the tree, his tail did not.

Without missing a beat, Rork, still in his natural playground, swung from branch to branch, quickly soaring away from the site of the attack. "Follow!" he called down to his companions, who were quickly running after him, but barely able to keep up.

The boys ran as fast as they could, soon losing track of Rork, but able to follow the trail of blood he left behind. They knew the slavers would be following the same trail, but for now, they had no other option but to run.

When his lungs were ready to turn inside out, Lido slowed Coren down. They could not hear the slavers behind them, but surely they were close. The blood trail had ended. Before them, Rork's body lay sprawled over a cluster of broken branches, his time in the trees cut short as his consciousness failed.

Quietly and reverently, Coren lifted the body of their friend over his shoulder, and they continued their escape through the forest.

Ahead they could see a very distinct thinning of the trees as they burst onto the road. It left them exposed, but they could move faster and were happy for the distance.

Rork was correct, the swamp was ending, and the road began straightening out. Far ahead they could make out a team of men on horses, the torches they held sent shards of glimmering light off their polished armor.

"It's a Faction patrol," Lido remarked. "Hey!"

With increased vigor, the boys rushed up to the soldiers, who had dismounted to approach the boys.

"You have to help us," Lido explained. "There are men in the forest who are trying to kill us. They injured our friend. He needs help."

“We can help,” one of the soldiers said, with a smile. “By chance, would you boys be from the Foothills area?”

“Yeah,” Coren said with a large rush of air as he gently placed Rork on the ground.

“Wonderful.”

A pair of clubs quickly descended on the boys, turning their world into darkness.