

II

The Trade Fair

The Foothills Trade Fair was the biggest market event of the year. Shopkeepers and merchants from all over the world met here to peddle their wares to new customers. The town itself, nestled at the base of Mount Hian, was fairly small, just some inns and warehouses. But the economy relied on the marketplace; keeping all the trees and fountains and parks beautiful so that when trade festivals occurred, the mayor was proud to host in such a lovely town.

The center square, an unusually large empty area in the center of town was now filled with tents, set up in unending rows, people swarming about them, almost packed together. It was a wonder they were able to move at all.

Crowds coming off the cable car almost immediately dispersed and took off running. It was easy for the boys to escape unseen. They soon added to the tumult of the fair crowd.

“Later, sprigs,” chuckled Kameryn with another flick to Lido’s hat. He and Coren sauntered off into the crowd.

“Thanks for helping me down, Lido,” said Levy with a wave. “See you later.”

Pollen and Lido walked toward the trade grounds. “What do you want to check out first?” asked Pollen.

“I don’t know. We can stop by the music shops if you want.”

“Great!” Pollen’s pace turned into a gallop as the boys entered the fray. The market was very loud. Venders hawking their products, customers haggling down prices, friends meeting friends, parents telling children “no.” It was like being swallowed by the ocean in a storm.

Before long, Pollen was getting too far ahead for Lido to catch up with.

“Pollen!” he yelled. Pollen turned and looked around, and caught a hand diving in and out of a sea of unfamiliar faces. “Meet you by the fountain at noon.”

“Ok,” Pollen yelled, waiting for an affirmation. The hand made a thumbs up. Pollen darted off into the crowd.

Lido slowed down his pace and looked around the market. The world was an open book. As he contemplated which corner of the market would catch his fancy, he was bumped from behind, his hat caught on someone’s brand new package and was thrown to the ground.

He immediately dropped to his knees, covered his ears and tried to grab for his hat, which was now being trampled by boots from all over the world. Finally, he snagged it, replaced it, and stood up.

In the crowd around he could feel the stares. “Ugh. Filthy Sprite,” one of them muttered, but continued walking.

Meekly he carried himself away from the shops and tucked himself away from the hateful glares. Carefully readjusting his hat, he bided as much time as he possibly could, trying to look natural while the crowd reset itself and no one in his presence was visually aware of him. He waited a moment longer than he was comfortable with, and quietly rejoined the river of people.

He left the shadow of the cable car station and disappeared into the bustle.

Kameryn and Coren were having just as hard of a time staying together, but the crowd caused them no difficulty. Coren had a sweet tooth.

They walked in a straight path, Kameryn shoving people out of his way, and people shoving themselves out of Coren’s. Before long, the larger of the two began smelling the distinct aroma of funnel cakes. He started tugging on Kameryn’s sleeve.

“What is it?”

Coren pointed at the cake stand.

“No! I’m not gonna stand around while you stuff your face, you big baby. It’s embarrassing.”

Coren looked at him with saddened eyes.

“Fine, just... meet me at the fountain later.”

Happily, Coren darted off. Kameryn shook his head and continued walking.

Coren approached the cake stand with a giant smile on his giant face. The cake vender was a little intimidated.

“What’ll it be, young’un?”

Coren pointed to the picture of the funnel cake on the board behind the vender. The vender started piling some doughy layers onto a plate.

“Want some fresh berries and whipped cream on that?”

Coren nodded gleefully.

“All right...” The Vender put the plate on the counter and ducked under the counter trustingly to grab his money chest. “That’ll be... three Lucre.”

He popped up on top to see Coren looking sad.

“What’s wrong, ain’t got the gold?”

Coren shook his head.

“Got any Montan Oir? We take Serkan, Nebarrese, Rode...”

Coren sheepishly dug into his pockets and pulled out a pair of silver coins. The cake vender grabbed them up.

“I tell you what, you look like an honest lad.” He tipped the plate in Coren’s direction. “Big lad too. Eat up your grub here, then head over to the wholesale district, you know where that is?”

Coren nodded with a pile of cake in his mouth and berries around his face.

The vender chuckled and wrote something on a piece of paper. “Look for Sam Wheatshed. Give him this piece of paper. He’ll help you pay off that coin you owe me, and you’ll probably walk off with a bit of extra scrap too.” He handed the paper to Coren, who grabbed it and shoved it in his shirt.

With a wave, Coren walked off.

Lido found himself in one of the back corners of the town, far from the crowds and the shops and the judging eyes. Behind the white stone buildings that made up the town, Lido leaned over a railing that overlooked a drainage ditch, flowing softly from the runoff down the mountain.

He rifled through his pockets and picked out one of the coins his aunt had given him as a birthday gift. “Some birthday,” he thought aloud as he tossed the coin into the tiny stream of water, wishing for a better day.

Happy Birthday. He turned. It seemed to come from the lone tree modeling from the circle of dirt cut around it.

He put his back to the water and faced the tree. He always felt a little more secure with something natural like that. And in a city full of vicious glares and cold concrete walls, the tree was very calming to him.

“Thank you,” he replied, more sincerely than he had that day.

It's my birthday too.

“Oh, well Happy Birthday to you as well. How old are you?”

Such a lovely day. No matter how much attention you gave a tree, it never seemed to have much to say.

Do do do doo. Singing? This was new. Lido had never known a tree to sing before.

“Do do doo...” No, it was coming from somewhere else. The wordless melody was soon accompanied by the rhythmic clapping of a wagon tottering over a cobblestone street.

A lone cart pusher emerged from a turn in the alleyway, and headed straight his way. It was a standard merchant's rolling kiosk, with a pair of large wheels and handles to lift it away when necessary. The tall cart was merely a stack of drawers and cabinets, designed to house a maximum amount of inventory, this one stuffed full of books.

He was about to turn away from it completely when his eye caught something. A small symbol, etched onto the cover of one of the books dangling from a hook under the kiosk's roof, filled Lido's senses with a sudden burst of excitement. It was like a stubby cross, even on all sides, except the top corners of the top leg protruded upward, leaving two points with a bowl between them. Lido was sure he had seen it before, perhaps in his infancy, or even in one of his vivid dreams.

The man noticed Lido's attention. “Nice day, isn't it?”

Lido nodded, but remained focused on the symbol. “What are you selling?”

“Selling?” replied the man. “No, not me. I'm a collector.”

“Oh, well then what are you collecting?”

“Books. Stories in general, really. It doesn't matter how they come to me. You don't have any stories on you, do you?”

Lido shrugged, shaking his head.

“Would you like to hear one?” the man asked.

“Actually, I was wondering what this symbol is.” As Lido reached out to touch it, it seemed to glow in his presence.

“Ah,” said the man. “That was the symbol of the Creedon.”

Quickly, Lido pulled his hand away, as if it had touched a hot stove. “I don’t know why anyone would want to hear stories about the Creedon, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“Oh, they were a fascinating race.”

“Fascinating and... evil.”

“You sound like you’re scared of them. But the Creedons are ancient history. And history is history, I say.”

Lido turned back toward the stream of water. “Well, I’m not interested in anything like that.”

“Oh really?” the man pressed. “I’m surprised, what with ears like those.”

Lido tensed up suddenly. As inconspicuously as possible, he checked out his reflection to ensure that his hat was properly in place. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he finally replied.

The cart pusher took a step back. “It seems I’ve hit a sore spot. I didn’t mean to offend. I think they’re rather nice-looking ears, if you don’t mind my saying.”

“You’d be the only one here who does,” Lido said, pushing himself away from the railing and preparing to exit the alcove.

“Now, hold on,” the cart pusher said, blocking Lido’s escape. “Now, I heard something about a birthday, is that right?”

“How did you know?”

The pusher made an odd face, as if the strings behind his face had become tangled, then loosened again. “You know, I’m not sure, but it seems to be true. And I’ve never been one to miss out on a birthday.”

The pusher began rifling through his treasure trove, desperately searching for an appropriate gift. Again, Lido somehow became fixated on that symbol. He hadn’t noticed that the book collector had finished his search and had stopped to smile triumphantly at Lido.

“A wise man once said, the greatest gift is the gift of bravery. And if one hasn’t yet, surely one will.” He pulled the book from its hook and handed it to Lido. “Why don’t you take this? The more you understand, the less you’ll fear.”

Apprehensively, Lido took the book in his hands. As he opened it, a small trinket dropped from it, a little metal coin attached to a chain.

Lido picked it up. “What is this?” he asked, admiring it.

“From the looks of it, I’d say it’s a bookmark.”

Lido balled the chain up in his hand and offered it to the cart pusher, who backed off.

“Oh no, it comes with the book. Both of them gifts, from me to you.”

“Well... thanks, um... sir.”

“Think nothing of it,” the book collector said, locking up the doors on his kiosk again and picking up the handles. “And call me Ben. Ben Ream. If you ever have any stories to tell, look for me.”

“I will,” Lido uttered, knowing the words were expected but not taken seriously.

Ben tucked the books back into their drawers and slapped the sides of his kiosk for luck.

“Happy birthday,” he sang as the cart starting rolling again and the man continued down the road, singing his song, only this time replacing his nonsense words with “happy birthday.”

Lido’s eyes followed him away with a curious look on his face.

When the man was gone, Lido gave the bookmark another look over. It had that same symbol on it. Filled with a blend of disgust and awe, he thought it best to cram it into his pocket, replacing the coin he had tossed earlier.

Lifting the book to his face, Lido turned back to the stream and slowly approached the railing as he skimmed through the lines on the pages before him.

...The Earth called out to them, but none could hear. They had not the ears to listen to the Earth, and they were deaf to her words, her love, her magic...

Ears. Lido balanced the book delicately on the railing and stared back into the water.

The hat did look awfully stuffed. He pulled the hat off and let his ears point out. They didn’t look that bad. Well, maybe a little.

Feeling doubtful, he put the hat back on his head.

“Come with me, boy!” A strong hand grabbed his shoulder and spun him around. As he turned, Lido’s arm clipped the corner of the book and it plopped acquiescently into the water.

A scruffy looking soldier put his face close to Lido’s. “Knew something was fishy about you.”

The gold and silver armor was a stark contrast to the soldier’s beaten and raggy face. As he snickered to himself, spit seeped out of his crooked teeth before he wiped it with his cape.

“You’re gonna put me in the General’s graces, little one. Let’s go.”

The music tents surrounded a gazebo, where traveling bands and singers showcased their talents. A barker at the foot of the stage spotted Pollen's flute and called him over.

"Hey, you there. How'd you like to show off your bardery?"

Pollen subconsciously tucked the flute behind his vest and shook his head. "No thanks."

"You sure? You might spot the fancy of a young lady in the crowd."

Strangely, as if by magic, just as the word "lady" was spoken, Pollen saw the most beautiful face he had ever seen, way across the crowd.

Though she seemed to be hiding behind a cloak and hood, her face stood out from the crowd like a lamp in a cave. She had striking features, but a soft face. She smiled at everyone she passed and gave a gentle wave to a stall owner. Her cheeks had a slight rosy tinge to them and her deep blue eyes made the sky seem gray in comparison.

"When would I go on?" Pollen asked the barker, not taking his eyes off the girl.

"Once this song is over, another band will play a song, then you."

"Yeah, let's do it."

The barker handed him a ticket and Pollen darted toward the girl.

He caught up to her talking with a lute tuner as she handed him a sack of coins.

"Is that the final word?"

"I'm sorry ma'am. Three of the strings were barely in accord, but the other four couldn't be tuned."

"Thank you, anyway, Louie."

With a sad gesture, she turned and ran into Pollen.

"Do you have a seven string lute?"

"I'm sorry," the girl said, trying to walk away. "I don't have time..."

Pollen pressed harder. “You know, I might play lute at the Academy. I’ve never heard of a seven-string lute though. I bet I could learn how to play it.”

The girl turned her face and began to walk away. “They’ll never be able to make it. Put those thoughts out of your mind.”

Pollen zipped around to cut her off. “I am an expert flutist though. Actually, any wind instrument. If you want I’ll play you a song on the stage.”

“I really must be going, sorry.”

“No, wait. Wait. I’m going up next. Can you just wait till the end of this song?”

She looked him in the eye, her glance met by the goofiest lovestruck grin she had ever seen, and giggled a little. As her head dipped, her ebony hair began to fall from beneath her hood. She quickly combed it back in. “Fine.”

“Great.”

The crowd applauded as the song finished and the band left the stage. The next band had already taken it as Pollen rushed up the stairs.

The barker turned to stop him. “Son, it’s not your turn yet.”

Without heeding, Pollen immediately began playing his song. At first it was simple and brash, but heads turned and smiled. Pollen reached the end of what he had racked his mind with the night before, and the night before that, weeks into the past – but the song continued, as if been written all along. Nearly everyone within earshot turned to see the boy that was playing. Soon, the band behind, already nodding their heads to the beat, joined in.

The crowd was clapping along and cheering. With fingers behind his back, Pollen motioned chord changes to the band behind him. He played with his eyes closed, though he

opened them in blinks to make sure the girl was still there. She was, for the most part. But just as the song was ending, she gave him a wave and disappeared into the crowd.

Pollen finished the song to cheers and wild applause. With a salute to the band, he jumped from the stage and tried to chase after her, but it was no use. The crowd beyond the stalls just spread into an ocean of ubiquitous faces; none shone nearly as brightly as the one he had seen.

Kameryn scooted down an alleyway. Somehow he had drifted into the town proper. In front of him, he could hear eggs breaking and laughter. He stopped and listened. They were coming this way.

He turned to walk away just as the boys came into the alley.

“Kameryn? Kameryn Lind?”

Kameryn turned to face them. They were about the same age as his brother, a few years older than himself, from another colony a few miles down the mountain from his - another colony run by his father. He had met them before. They were not nice. They started to surround him.

“It is! Little Baby Lind.”

“Where’s your big fat bodyguard, Lind?”

“You going mining next year, Lind, or are you gonna run away like your brother?”

Kameryn tried to escape from them, but was grabbed by the back of his collar. Soon after, other arms grabbed his legs and lifted him in the air.

“Put me down you piss swillers.”

“Gosh oh gosh, would you listen to that trash talk?” Two boys carried him to a refuse container as the third lifted the lid. “You know what I always say? Trash talk belongs in the...” They tossed him in. “Trash can.”

The light of day was soon blocked out by the lid returning to its place.

“Tell your dad we said ‘hi’.”

Lido was dragged all the way to a tall, wooden cart on the outskirts of town. It was painted gold and white, matching the soldier’s armor. The soldier dragged Lido up a ramp and through the door, tossing him to the ground.

“Look, sir, I found a Creedon.”

Lido found himself staring at a pair of well decorated, but dangerous gold boots. He followed them up the body to gaze at the full semblance of General Felix Horrd.

A giant of a man, Horrd stood over six feet tall, his armor cut off around the shoulders to display his fierce arms. He had a well trimmed beard, but no other hair on his head. He stared down at Lido coldly. Lido cowered before him, covering his head with his arms.

“Why is this boy in my wagon?” his deep voice boomed. The sound of his words matched the man’s size. He was the biggest man Lido had ever seen, even bigger than Sergeant Gorum, and not even a Montan.

“A Creedon sir, lookit.”

“An unbreed Sprite. This isn’t worth my time.”

“No sir, this one’s the real deal. I swear it. He does magic.”

Horrd gave the boy a look over and scoffed. “There’s no magic in him, and do you know how I know?”

“How’s that, sir?”

Horrd grabbed the soldier by his armor and pulled him close to his face. “Because a real Creedon would have incinerated your tiny brain as soon as you laid hands on him.”

“But I swear it.”

Horrd brushed off the soldier’s lame expression and stared intently into Lido’s eyes. “All right, boy. If you are magic, I want you to turn this soldier into a frog. You know what a frog is, right?”

Lido, petrified beyond anything but agreement, nodded slowly.

Horrd smiled proudly. “He’s not far from being a frog at present, is he?”

Lido shook his head, same frightened accordance as before.

“So it should be easy. On the count of three, turn him into a frog, got it? One... two...”

The soldier stepped backward, staring at Lido from the bottom of his eye sockets.

“Three.”

Horrd clapped his hands together swiftly, the sharp sound sent the soldier tumbling through the door behind him. The General stood over the poor man, a stone cold glare now residing on his face.

“Return to your post, soldier.”

“Y-y-yes sir,” the man stammered before disappearing back into the town.

Horrd turned to Lido, his expression softened, but no longer playful. “And you, son, I think we both know there’s something about your appearance that should be... kept under wraps?”

Lido nodded, grabbed his hat, and quickly scampered away.

He kicked the lid off the garbage can and watched the clouds go by. He nestled himself in his seat for a few minutes, trying to figure out what exactly he was sitting in. Cotton padding, linen wrappings, junk left over from the standard transportation of goods.

“I love the Trade Fair,” Kameryn said to himself as he pulled his body back onto the ground.

He dusted himself off as best he could and rejoined the Trade Fair.

Before long, he came to the place he desired to be: Foreign Arms. He approached the shopkeeper.

“Hey there, whoa. You smell.”

“I smell, but I’ve got money.” He dropped a large, heavy sack on the counter. “Fifteen hundred gold lucre. What can you show me?”

The shopkeeper untied the bag and stared greedily at the glittering gold coins. Cheerily, he grabbed a stack of blades wrapped in canvas and brought them to the counter.

“These are the finest in Serkan longswords, made by craftsmen who know the real art of swordmaking. Not as clumsy and bulky as those Faction blades you’ll find in the military. Fifteen hundred exactly.”

He started untying and pulling blades halfway from the sheaths and leaving them on the counter for Kameryn to examine, but that boy’s attention was caught by the blade being displayed in the back of the tent. It was long and sharp, with a slight reddish tinge. Right at the end of the hilt was a black jewel, with the shape of a dragon embossed on it. The shopkeeper noticed the boy’s attraction.

“Ah... a genuine Blackstone. Without a doubt the greatest blade in this city, possibly the world. Far too expensive for your coin, though. This will most likely end up in the warehouse of a collector. They don't make them like this anymore.”

“They don't, do they?” Kameryn uttered with the shopkeeper shaking his head in agreement. “Unfortunately it's a fake.”

“What?”

“Those rivets at the base of the blade, that's a fairly new Nebarrese convention. Blackstone was long gone before those were put into use.”

“Well... someone could have put those in afterwards... to keep it modern.”

“No. If that's an actual Blackstone sword, the metal would be too strong for anyone to put a dent in but Blackstone himself. Impressive forgery, but a true collector would spot it in an instant.”

The shopkeeper became uneasy, going over these new facts in his head.

“Gee, you should put that away. A collector spots that, you could lose your credibility. Or...”

“Or what?”

“I could take it off your hands.”

“But it's worthless,” the shopkeeper whined, defeated.

“I'd say the jewel itself is worth almost fifteen hundred gold lucre. The rest can be melted down for materials.”

“Fine, fine, fine.” He wrapped the sword with a sheet of butcher paper, tied it with twine, and placed it on the counter. “Fifteen hundred?”

Kameryn put a hand on the sword, and quickly put his hand in the sack, pulling up a pair of coins and showing them to the shopkeeper. “I said *almost* fifteen hundred.”

“Yes, yes. Good.” The shopkeeper tied up the sack and pulled it behind him. “Oh, you know it’s against the law to unsheathe a blade in town. Keep that thing covered, boy. For both our sakes.”

He watched as Kameryn walked away, then pulled his front curtains close and scuttled to the back of his tent. He untied the sack and poured its contents on a table, laughing gleefully as the coins piled up. His laughter soon faded as the short stream of coins became buried under a pile of rocks.

“Curses!”

He jumped to the front of his tent and out into the row of stores. “Where are you? Curse you, boy.” Kameryn was nowhere to be found.

Lido tried to make his flight from that Faction cart as inconspicuous as possible, but he was afraid for his life. He had broken out into a run before he knew it, and even then, he didn’t know why.

There were a bevy of scenarios that could have played out in that wagon, and the one that did was fairly favorable. His motives unclear, soon Lido found himself way outside of the town, where the canals and drains simply emptied into the flood plain. He also found that he was not merely running, he was being chased.

“You made me a fool,” shrieked his aggressor as his fingers wedged their way behind Lido’s collar, pulling him to the ground.

Lido’s face plowed into the mud, the soldier’s grip still at the back of his neck.

“Use your magic! Do something.” Again and again, the angry man lifted and dropped Lido into the mud.

“Don’t bother holding back! There’s no one around. Just use your magic. It’ll be between you and me.”

Lido remained still. The guard grew bored. “Maybe you are just a worthless Unbreed.”

With a kick and a spit, the guard left Lido to the leeches.

The Sprite waited there, in the sludge, until long after the soldier’s soggy footsteps went unheard. Finally he lifted himself up and crawled to the edge of a ditch. Taking handfuls of water, he washed his face as best he could, scraping off huge globs of mud from his clothes and skin.

He came across a book during his bath. The same one that had fallen into the river before his capture. Angrily, he ripped away at it, trying to tear it clean in half before giving up and stripping the individual pages. He flung the empty cover back into the mud as he collapsed onto a warm flat rock, feeling the rays of the sun against his eyelids.

Don’t worry. I’ll have you dry in no time.

Pollen swam through the crowds, searching desperately for the girl. Occasionally, he was greeted with a “Nice work, lad,” or a “Such talent you have,” but he quickly nodded them away. When he asked if anyone saw the girl, none remembered seeing her. The third time he ended up back at the gazebo, he gave up.

Now armed, Kameryn returned to the alleyways, hoping to run into one of those older boys, or at least a thief or cutpurse. He found none of those, but he did spot Levy Topper, sitting on a stairway, happily eating a piece of pie.

“Gluttonous Montans,” Kameryn snickered to himself. He quietly stalked his prey.

Putting an arm around the boy’s neck, trapping him against the railing, and pressing the sword against his back, Kameryn growled, “Gimme your money.”

Levy dropped his pie. “There’s a sack on my belt. Take it all, sir.”

Kameryn grabbed the sack and began looking through it. Levy turned and saw his assailant.

“Kameryn! What’s the business?” He scraped his pie off the ground and began flicking off the pieces of dirt.

“Just wanted to show off my new sword. And you owe me cable car money.” Kameryn pulled some pieces from the sack and tossed it back at Levy. “Looks like you don’t have enough.”

“Give it back. What makes you think I owe you money anyway?”

“Helping you sneak on the cars? Come on, gotta make some capital here.”

“You didn’t help me, Lido did.”

“Well, who gave Lido that idea, hmm? Is that all you have?”

“Of course it is. How much do you think I have?”

“More! I gotta fill my dad’s bank or he’s gonna notice I took his gold.”

“How much did you take?”

“About fifty gold worth.”

“Ha!” Levy chuckled to himself and crammed some pie in his mouth. “You can have the money. It’d be worth it to see you get it from your old man.”

Kameryn slapped the rest of the pie from his hand.

“Hey.”

“Get yourself another.” He tossed a coin back to Levy as he stormed away, wrapping his sword in the canvas again.

Levy caught the coin before bending over and picking up his pie again. With a shrug, he took another bite.

The clock struck noon. Lido sat on a bench, in the darkest shade he could find that still had a view of the fountain. After several minutes Pollen finally appeared, pacing around the fountain nervously, his gaze passing by every face in view. Lido attempted to wave at him, hissing his name in tones too quiet to be heard, but even when his cousin’s eyes had Lido in full view, they just seemed to glance over him. Finally Lido mustered the courage to leave his hideaway.

“Pollen. Hey.”

“Oh Lido,” Pollen sighed, as if forgetting who he was supposed to meet there. “You’ll never guess how my day was. There was this girl... you look awful.”

Lido shook his head. “Long story, I’ll tell you about it when we get home.”

Kameryn spotted them and came over. “Hey, have you guys seen Coren? He was supposed to meet me...” Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed his companion heading over, carrying two baskets of rolls hanging from a stick over his back.

“Gracious, gracious, look at this specimen. Guess I wasn’t the only one to walk away with a deal.” Kameryn placed his wrapped sword on the edge of the fountain and walked up to meet Coren, grabbing one of the rolls from the basket. “And just in time, too. I’m starving.”

“So, tell me about this girl...”

“Hey Kean,” interrupted Kameryn. “Check this out, a real Blackstone.” He unwrapped the sword enough to show the jewel on the hilt.

“No way,” exclaimed Pollen. “It’s a fake. You’d never be able to afford such a thing.”

“You, Little Kean, don’t know a thing about haggling.”

“You mean exploiting. Seriously, how’d you get it?”

“That doesn’t matter. What matters is that it’s real. If you don’t believe me, I’ll show it to you away from the guards, if you know what I mean.”

Kameryn gave Pollen a stern look. Pollen met his glare with one of his own.

“Fine, we believe you, Kameryn,” said Lido, breaking the tension. “Tell me about this girl, Pollen.”

“Oh, she was beautiful, beyond words... if only I could see her again.”

As if his words had some magic to them, she broke through the crowd like the sun breaking through a storm. Only she didn’t appear so sunny. She was running for her life.

“Oh no you don’t, girlie.” A man in a black mask broke the crowd behind her. “There she is!” he called out behind him.

Another masked man appeared ahead of her and grabbed her. She wrestled out of his grasp, but tripped over him and soon they were both in the fountain.

Lido held his hand out to Kameryn. “Give me your sword.”

Kameryn grabbed his parcel and held it against his chest. “Not a chance.”

Lido dropped his eyebrow at Kameryn, then took off into the fountain, leaving the other three dumbfounded.

The wet assailant had regained his footing and grabbed the girl's leg as she tried to escape the fountain. "Not so f--"

Before he could finish his sentence, he felt his blade being pulled from his belt and placed against his throat.

"Let go of the girl," Lido snarled. The masked man did as he was told. The girl leapt out of the water to face the other man chasing her. With a sneer he lunged for her, but was caught in the face by Pollen's fist.

"Ow!" Pollen shook the pain from his fist. He turned back to the girl with a wink. "Oh my... Ow!"

"Pollen, get her out of here," yelled Lido.

Pollen grabbed the girl's hand and started running. "I'm Pollen by the way," he quipped.

"Grab his sword," she said in introduction.

"Hmm?"

Still tethered to Pollen's arm, the girl lunged at the recently incapacitated man's sword before dragging Pollen after Lido.

Coren darted his glance between the action in the fountain and Kameryn, waiting for a signal to move. Kameryn noticed and gave him a nod. "Fine." Kameryn ripped the paper from his sword and tied the scabbard around his waist, Coren knocked the baskets off his stick and broke it in half.

A whole wave of dark assailants began flooding the fountain square, chasing after the girl and Pollen, closely pursued by Lido. The first two ducked into an alley when Lido turned and

faced the pursuers, swinging his sword. They circled around him, chuckling to themselves as they closed in.

“Duck!” yelled Lido as he threw the sword straight up in the air. The masked men watched the sword hover in the air, turn its point, and then fall to the ground, covering their heads and dashing to get out of the way.

It clanked harmlessly to the ground. The assailants regained their composure and saw the boy darting down the alley.

“After them!” Shouted one of the men, who wore a tri-cornered hat with a feather. He grabbed the crossbow hanging from his belt and aimed it at the fleeing boy. “Not so fast,” he whispered.

The bolt flew into the side of a nearby building as the feathered man fell under Coren’s weight. Kameryn skipped over the downed man, knocked the sword from an unwitting hand and turned back to his friend. “Come on, you big lummo.”

Coren jumped to his feet and thundered after Kameryn, knocking another of the men over with his giant hand on the way.