

## IV

### Eating Bugs

The Sprite and the Montan were pulled from the sinking laundry wagon and laid on the side of the pond, next to the stones that acted as the tools of their freedom. Around them stood five frightened lizard-men, scared to death that they may have killed these two helpless young boys. But to their relief, they both sat up, cold, wet, and confused as the five green men danced around them happily.

“Fwends!” one of them croaked. “Gwe did nod know. Zo zorry.”

Scavenging the remains of their wreckage, Lido, Coren, and their new friends were able to construct a make-shift tent (as it was still raining) and a fire (as they were cold), and allowed their would-be captors a chance to explain themselves. The lizard men spoke almost in unison, as if reading from a songbook, each knowing exactly when to come in or be silent. They had different styles too. Forn, the young one, spoke first, usually, as he was always very excited to say something, but then Morryn, the old one, always felt the need to clarify. Mygur, who seemed to be the leader, was all too eager to explain the minute details of his planning and execution. Gwydar didn’t seem too bright, he mainly stuck to adding sound effects to the exciting parts, and then there was Bork, who had been the apologetic one earlier, was now very quiet, only really speaking when there were parts none of the others could fill.

What they told, was their story of how they came to be in the mountain. They were Mydians, well used deep in Lucra, or the wealthier parts of Serka, as slaves. Housework, factory work, sometimes pulling rickshaws or powering generators; if a body was needed, it could be bought. They were being shipped with a noble couple moving to Linka, the Montan capitol at the peak of Mount Hian to be used as extra hands around their shop; stacking inventory, moving large crates and pulling deliveries, of course chained and shackled the whole time. Between the

move, the dizzying heights they were finding themselves in, and the terrible behavior of their master, they decided that they had enough.

Escape for them was not a problem, at first, as most of the ones put in charge of watching them considered them little more than animals, with an intellect to match. Lido and Coren could corroborate this, though they wouldn't dare out loud. Before this night, they had known very little about the Mydians, and realized the little they did was mostly assumed and incorrect. But it was this stigma that allowed for their escape. It was just a matter of waiting for a temporary hire, feeling very bold with his sudden command over *five* employees, to allow his keyring to get within the reach of a very skilled green hand.

They soon had their freedom, but they had a large mountain to descend, and a long way back to the swamp with nothing safe to eat for days. When they became desperate, they saw the laundry cart waiting by the side of the road as the drivers relieved themselves, and, not realizing there were passengers, hopped on top and took off down the mountain. Which brought them to where they were, far downhill from Linka, and 12, and probably much of the country of Monta.

And there were Lido and Coren, miles from home, in a swamp, covered with mud and grass and insects, lying under a tent of underwear. It was a bizarre situation and certainly not one that would be remedied that night. In the morning they would be able to find their way home.

Kameryn was gone when Pollen awoke. There were only a few slats missing from the bottom of the barricade; he had slipped underneath.

Pollen slowly pulled himself into a stand, dusted himself off and checked on the Princess. She was sleeping soundly in her makeshift room. He couldn't help but watch. The beauty that had drawn him to her the day before seemed to radiate more than ever now.

He was entranced by her slumbering visage, a reverie which was soon broken by the voice of his rival.

“Coast is clear. We better head out.”

Merci slowly opened her eyes to see Pollen sitting over her, talking with Kameryn.

“Good morning,” she said with a yawn.

Pollen’s lips parted slowly, the perfect reply slowly rising from his lungs like a loaf of bread, but Kameryn stepped in. “Sun’s up, kids. Better get moving.”

Kameryn had woken up a completely different person. The back-talking neighborhood punk was noticeably more poised and proper, and suddenly he had become the leader of this little group, even taking to referring to the other two as “kids”. Of course, the biggest change, at least the one Pollen was the most aware of, was that he seemed to be taking the bulk of Merci’s attention, and it wasn’t through fighting.

They were traveling over the plains in the shadow of Mount Hian. The native Hianites were familiar with this area, of course, it being the land of their youth, but Merci, only traveling through Monta via the major roadways, swooned at the natural beauty of this nestled little valley.

Between the slopes of looming Mount Hian, and the twin peaks of Riga and Luka, its cousins to the south, nature ran wild. A field of wildflowers carpeted their route as far as they could see.

“I’ve never seen anything so beautiful,” she exclaimed.

Kameryn responded with “What? You mean the flowers?”

“Yes, the flowers. Don’t they... don’t they move you?”

Kameryn shrugged and looked at Pollen, who had a similar blank look on his face.

“I dunno, I guess we’re just used to it,” Pollen said, finally, hoping to understand the situation.

“Well, I’ve never seen anything like it before.”

“It’s been a while since that first time I saw it,” Pollen mused. “It’s kind of strange how you let that sort of beauty fade away. The beauty of seeing something like that for the first time. Of course, some things manage to have that sort of beautiful shock every time you see them.” He purposefully aimed that last little bit at Merci.

She stared back at him, her eyes even bluer than before, glittering with stars as if day and night fused at this one place and time. “Have you ever seen anything like that before?”

“I think so, I mean...”

“I know I have,” Kameryn interrupted. “Pollen’s mom. Whoa, what a looker.”

Merci giggled lightly, covering her mouth to attempt to save Pollen’s feelings, but it was too late. The moment was ruined.

Coren was shaken awake, not by Lido, but by the Mydians, to let him know that they would be moving on, and wondering what he would do.

“I’m not sure,” Coren said, shaking the sleep from his head. “Where’s Lido?”

“Gwe habe nod zeen him,” Bork, the quieter one relented. “Thad one awoge very earry, an’ gwe did’n unnerstan’. Hoping gyoud ezplain.”

“The only thing I can explain right now is sleep,” Coren announced, repositioning himself underneath his warm longjohn-made blanket. “Let me do a bit of research first and I’ll get back to you.”

“Bad news,” said Lido, popping out of the brush. “I have no idea where we are.”

Coren shot a single, concerned eye his way. “What does that mean?”

“Bork,” Lido pleaded, “would it be all right if we followed you to your home?”

This question delighted Bork, and his countenance did not hide this emotion. “Fwends! Please!”

Though it caused him much discomfort, Coren managed to get to his feet, rolling up his warm blanket, holding it against him as he did. “Are you sure that’s a good idea?” Coren asked.

“I’m sure from their village, we can find a way to get home,” Lido assured him, adding a confusing look that was hidden from the Mydians.

Coren wasn’t sure what it meant, but he took it in stride. “All right. I think that sounds good.”

“Wunnerful!” Bork exclaimed, and danced over to tell his companions the good news.

Coren leaned close to the Sprite. “What’s your thinking, buddy? You’ve never been lost a day in your life. Not outside anyway.”

Lido took a deep breath and listened to the winds flowing down from Mount Hian as it danced through the trees and told him all the exciting things they’ve seen from there to here. “I’m worried about them.”

“Do you think the guys that were chasing us were slavers?”

“They seemed like mercenaries to me. Meaning that if they weren’t with the slavers, they could be easily. Besides that, between them and the slavers, the Faction won’t be too happy about their stolen underwear.” They watched as Bork joined his friends, pointed back at Lido and Coren, and helped them bury the wagon further into the pond. “Ruined underwear.”

“You never thought of them as human either, did you?”

“To be honest, I never thought I’d run into someone who had a worse lot than I did...” For the first time in a while, Lido was conscious of his hat and how stifling his large ears felt within it. “I almost feel like... if they can be free, so can I.”

Lido’s had made a move toward his tightly-knit cap, but Coren held it down. “I wouldn’t... not just yet. Who knows how the Sprites have affected the Mydians.”

Bork came waddling back, his flat feet kicking up mud, his large mouth upturned in the largest grin they’d ever seen. “Fwends! Are you ready to gwo?”

With a shrug to each other first, the boys nodded at Bork and began walking with him towards the group. “Ready as we’ll ever be,” Coren mused, tossing his underwear-blanket into the pond, but not watching as the weight of the sinking wagon sucked it under. “I hope you guys have a lot of food where you live, cuz I’m gonna need it.”

Food was a primary concern for another group of impromptu travelers. Far away from the swamps of Mydia, a girl and her two male “saviors” were having similar thoughts.

“We gotta eat something,” Kameryn whined.

“Geez, you sound just like Coren,” Pollen commented.

“Well, he’s right about some things, you know, like how people gotta eat, or they’ll DIE.”

“A person can last weeks without eating,” Pollen stated confidentially.

“Yeah, if they’re lying in a bed, waiting for it,” Kameryn argued, “but we’re walking. We’re using energy. Maybe you don’t have to, but me, I gotta eat.”

“He’s right,” Merci added. “Maybe we should find some food.”

Pollen was flustered, but he had to agree. His stomach had been aching since the night before. “Fine. What do you suggest?”

Kameryn looked around, scratching his stomach. “Maybe we could find a bird’s nest or something...”

“Eggs? And what would we cook them with?”

“Maybe we could fry them on your head.”

“Boys!” Merci screamed. “The more you argue, the more energy you’re wasting. Now, you know this area more than I do... are there any kinds of nuts or berries we should be looking for that are edible?”

“Nuts?” Kameryn laughed. “Berries? You looking to make a salad?” In spite of himself, Pollen was giggling too. “You’re right though, with teamwork we could probably catch a cabbage or something.”

Merci’s face was reddening even deeper now. “Well... I don’t see...”

Pollen felt he should step in. “Look, it’ll be fine. Why don’t you start looking for wood to make a fire, and we’ll go find something to cook... we’ll meet back at that tree.” Pollen gestured to a lonesome oak tree in the middle of a flowery field.

“Fine... you boys go do your men’s work, and I’ll be here, making the fire.”

Pollen and Kameryn took back to the foothills in search of game. They waited until they were far enough away from Merci before they started talking.

“So,” Pollen started, “have you ever been hunting before?”

“I caught a bear once with my brother in Serka.”

“Really?”

“Well... we found a bear... in a bear trap... it was mostly dead, but we figured we should put it out of its misery.”

“What’d you kill it with?”

“A cross bow... and a stick of dynamite.”

“Huh,” Pollen quipped, trying to unstick the image of scattered bearguts from his mind.

“We don’t have any of those at our disposal right now, but that’s a start...”

“Shut up,” Kameryn chimed playfully. “Now what are we going to eat?”

As they passed over another ridge and gazed into the valley that separated the twin peaks Riga and Liga, they saw a herd of deer grazing in the soft grass of the meadow and dipping their heads into the stream. Using all the tracking skills they could muster, they stodgily crept closer to the riverbank, keeping their heads beneath the brushline and their voices even lower.

“So what’s the plan, Huntmaster?” Pollen whispered.

“I was thinking we could use you as bait.”

“How about we set a trap for one and then you stab it with your sword?”

“That could work... what kind of trap did you have in mind?”

“Here,” Pollen said, as he unfastened his belt, “we’ll tie our belts together to make a tripline. Then I’ll go rouse the deer over there, and when one trips over the belts, you get it with your sword, all right?”

Like a pair of deadly snakes, the two boys slithered into position, eyes keen on their prey.

Very far to the west, in the Mydian Swamps, Lido and Coren were having a hard time keeping up with their new green companions. The Mydians were sprinting now, filled with the charisma and vigor offered only to those who have been away from home so long and wanting only to be back as soon as possible.

Their home was Magwul, a bustling Mydian town, deep in the heart of the swamp. The villagers here lived in odd, gourd-shaped houses made from the seeds of giant trees, hollowed out and buried half-way in the ground. The deep waters of the swamp bordered the town on the southern side, with various pools and inlets leading water back that way. In the town’s center, a giant pavilion acted as a focal point and a meeting area. From there, a road led its way north out of the swamp.

They followed Bork, the only one of the group who had bothered waiting up for them. Bork took the boys to a sizeable gourd-house near the center of town, where he was greeted within by his brothers, Gwork, Rork, Nork, and Dugan. There was much celebration in the house and they quickly set up a feast for their brother and his new companions. Bowls of various creams and mashes and shells filled the table top, and within moments all seven were seated around the long wooden table.

The brothers all bowed their heads. Dugan, the oldest, sat at the end of the table and said a little prayer.

“Gwe bray do da ones dat gwame befor’us’n da onez dat’ll gwome affer’us. Gwe’re dankful fur da dime dat gwe ‘ave, rid’ere inna middo.”

“Middo,” the rest of them repeated, then turned to their guests seated at the other end with great big smiles and paused.

All eyes on them, Lido and Coren sat confused. Obviously they were inclined to do something, but they did not know what that was, so they smiled back.

Bork tried to offer some friendly advice. “Fwends. You are da gwests. You gidda stard eading firs.”

They looked around and besides the bowls, there were no forks or plates or tableware of any kind. They were still smiling at them. Lido started to sweat a little. But Coren went with his gut.

He reached out his hand, grabbed a little of the creamy stuff, shoved it in his mouth with a great big “Mmm...” The brothers cheered and they all began eating in this manner.

Lido joined in once the ice was broken and the feast was underway.

At some moment, Coren was about to inquire what it was they were eating that he was enjoying so much, but Lido stopped him once he noticed one of the brothers catch a fly with his hand and cram it into his mouth.

“I don’t think we want to know.”

Bowls were passed around the table and crumbs flew for a while on, until Coren decided to thank his hosts.

“This is a really great meal, guys. And to be honest, I’m just glad you’re not trying to eat us!” he burst, trying to be jolly, but the room suddenly became very quiet.

“Gwe would neber ead a perzin,” Nork exclaimed.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that, it was a joke.”

Dugan put down his food to settle the situation. “You don’ unnerstad, dere are zome Mydians dat are kidda nasdy.”

“Da Skuzzigs!” Rork snarled before breaking into laughter.

“Who are the Skuzzigs?” Lido asked.

“No,” Bork corrected with some concentration, “da *Skuzziks*.”

“Skuzziks?”

“Righd!”

“Da Skuzziks libe deep in da swamp,” Dugan explained, for he had the thinnest accent. “Dey’re Mydians, lige us, but dey’re not civilized, lige us.”

The brothers nodded proudly, in unison.

“Gwe all used do be gwild, lige da Skuzziks, but not for a long time.”

“When did you become civilized?” Lido asked.

“When da Gwedons showed us,” Dugan explained. “Da Gwedons used to be our neighbors. Many times ago. Dey taughd us many dings, lige how da farm and make tools and stuff. But dey disappeared a long ago.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Gwe don’ know. Jus’ one day, gone.”

“But gwe’m still civilized,” Nork added. “Nod lige dem nazzy Skuzzigs.”

“Skuzzigs,” Rork snarled again.

“Are there any Skuzziks around here?” Lido asked.

“Somedimes,” Bork said. “Zomedimes qwe zee dem deep inna swamp, or zomedmies dey gwome da daig zome vedables, bud dad’s id.”

“Do you guys ever fight?” Coren asked.

“Gwe neba fighd,” Bork implored. “Dad’s whadda Gwedons zaid. Neba fighd.”

“Do the Skuzziks try to fight you?”

“As long as dey ged whadday gwand, dey’s happy.”

“Bud dey’re no funadall,” Rork added. “No liga dell sdories or zing zongs or nuddin’. Poo.” He stuck his tongue out at the thought of it.

An hour or two after they had set out for food, Kameryn and Pollen came strolling back triumphantly with their shirts full of nuts and berries.

Kameryn did his best to march proudly, but he could barely keep his smile down under the situation. “How do you want to break this to her?”

“Do you think she’d believe we decided to become vegetarians?”

“Might work.”

Ahead they could see a small plume of smoke. “Looks like she got the fire going.”

“You like her, don’t you?”

Pollen was surprised and confused by Kameryn’s question. Not only the implications of the answer, but what did it mean by his asking? Was he trying to incite some emotional response from him?

“It seems odd to think about,” Kameryn continued without waiting for Pollen’s response. “We’ll get her back to Nebarra and she’ll be back with her nice, well-to-do, diplomat family, I mean, I don’t really see anything happening at that point.”

Pollen was furious... he was talking about himself, wasn’t he? He wanted her for himself, he was just trying to get ahead with Pollen’s help... well, he wasn’t about to fall into that trap.

“I think I would care more if she were more my type, you know? But she’s just too prissy... she would probably be horrified if we *did* bring back a deer. I bet she’d refuse to eat it, huh?”

“Yes,” Pollen stated, very resolutely, finally answering Kameryn’s question from before.

“I don’t want to say anything... but if you did like her, she would be all yours, all right?”

Before he could respond, Kameryn stopped him short as Merci came into view, sitting over a spit she had set up, and it looked like something was cooking.

“I was wondering when you boys would show up. I caught a rabbit.”

“Or not...” Kameryn said softly, under his breath.

Soon after lunch was served, Bork and his brothers began preparations on the evening feast. The tradition baffled Lido, but Coren had no problem with it. After dinner, the brothers and their guests retired to the firepit in the center of the gourd house, where they told folk stories about their race.

An odd thing that they learned about the Mydians is that they are not prone to individualism. Sure they all had names, but an interesting feature of their dialect is that they only have one word to say either “I” or “we”: “Gwe”. This word came up often in conversation, and the boys were very confused by the subject of a many sentence, until this piece of vernacular rubbed off on them. But it wasn’t just an oddity in their language, it was almost a tradition.

In the stories the brothers told, of Mydians and Gwedons, men and dragons, the entire Mydian race acted as the main character, as if the achievement of one became the achievement of an entire species.

When Gygur, the first dragon stepped onto the land, it wasn’t just their ancestor, he was the Mydian race. When Magwul was settled, it wasn’t done by one or two men, but by the entire race. Every piece of folklore and history combined to create their existence.

The brothers dropped off one by one; with a big yawn they excused themselves and slugged away to their beds.

Very late into the night, Dugan picked up young Rork and only Lido, Coren, and Bork were left by the dying embers.

As Bork watched his brothers head away, a very forlorn face overtook him. He sighed cheerlessly, blowing on the dying coal simultaneously, which glowed red before retiring completely into smoke.

“Bork, what’s wrong?” pressed Lido. “You don’t look very happy for someone who just gained your freedom.”

“Id’s a very shord fweedom,” Bork professed. “Very shord indeed.”

“What do you mean?”

“Da slabers gwill redurn zoon. An’den dey’ll gwill us.”

Rather than have you translate a whole slur of Myd-speak, I’ll just paraphrase for you. The “slabers” Bork spoke of were Lucien Den and his band of slaveherders. They appeared here first many years ago, in a violent storm. They raided, burned half the town, had the citizens line up, and the ten strongest-looking were chained, put in a cart, and driven away. The Mydians had no idea what to make of this bizarre occurrence. Were they entering into a war? Or had those ten committed crimes they were unaware of.

The men returned more times, though each was a little less violent as the townsfolk had learned that if they simply line up, less damage is done to the town. The men loaded up more Mydians and drove back out of the swamp. This went on for years, until one of the taken ones, Gwyd, returned, and told the rest his story. The men had taken him, put a brand on his arm, and sold him into slavery. It was an odd concept for the Mydians to understand. The “slave” simply did whatever work the “master” told him to do, but never received anything for it, the master never helped, only gave orders. But in true Mydian fashion, Gwyd did as he was told, accepting his place in the world, thankful that he had one.

Soon, he was joined by more of the townspeople, and some from other towns; they too were slaves. And there were so many of the Mydians that the master had to hire another human just to tell the slaves what to do.

The new human was meaner than the master, which is saying much. He would often beat the slaves for no reason, saying it would make them better workers. It wasn't long before he beat one to death.

Angered, Gwyd snuck away one night, and managed to find his way back to the village. Not more than two days later, the slavers were back, they identified the brand on Gwyd's shoulder, and cut his head off. Then they grabbed another to take his place.

By this point, they were aware of what was going on, and they managed to at least strike a deal which allowed Mydians to volunteer. Bork had done so, to spare his brothers the agony. After much convincing they let him go. Bork worked many jobs, all across the country - pumping bellows in a foundry, pushing carts of ore, running the rickshaws - before he was transferred with the others to Linka. Bork wasn't happy, but he was satisfied knowing that his burden was not carried by his brothers. It was the others who were unsatisfied. There were six originally. The cold mountain air was not good for them, and they were not given warm facilities to stay in. One succumbed to the cold, and Morryn was on the brink, so they decided to escape. Better to die in the swamp than as slaves.

"Id 'ad do be all or nothin," Bork continued. "Gwe's fine doin' da gwork, gweepin' my brodders from 'avin' da gwork. Bud dey gwould'n do id gwiddout gwe, so gwe wend along."

"So what's gonna happen?" asked Coren.

"Luzzen n'da slabers gwill be 'ere, zoon, very zoon... gwe an' Mygur n' Forn n' Morryn n' Gwydar'll die. Dey'll probably dake one of my brodders... or all of dem."

He turned and faced the boys, his eyes full of guilt. "Gwe did'n gwanna go. Gwe zwear."

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” Lido protested, filling with anger.

Coren patted Bork on the back sympathetically and added, “You shouldn’t feel guilty.”

“And your brothers will be fine.” A grave look came over Lido’s face. The same expression seen when he decided to save that girl from those masked men in the fountain.

“Zure,” Bork agreed, wearily. “Gwe’m allas be fine.”

“There’s gotta be something we can do,” Coren started, but Bork stood and cut him off.

“Gwe’m tired. Led gwe zhow you do your room.”

Bork showed the boys to a cozy room on the second floor where there were two beds ready for them.

The boys were relieved to see something soft and dry after having spent a day trudging through muck.

Coren plopped down, tossed off his shoes and stared at the ceiling. “I never want to stand again.”

He looked over at Lido, who was pulling off his hat and scratching his ears and hair all over. “I’ve been waiting all day for this,” he exclaimed before snuggling into the other bed. “Mydians and Skuzziks and Gwedons and slaveherders. What do you make of it all?”

“They’re sure a superstitious bunch, aren’t they?” Lido looked down at his silhouette on the floor, saw the lines his ears cut onto the ground, pointing straight past the top of his head. “Maybe I should keep this on for now. I don’t know what they’ll do if they find out I’m a Sprite.” He pulled the hat back on his head and laid against his pillow, trying to find a comfortable way to rest his head.

“I dunno,” Coren yawned. “They don’t seem the type to judge. I can’t help but think of how peaceful the world would be if it were only the Mydians. No rulers, no wars, just people being nice to each other.”

“It seems they have a history of being taken advantage of,” Lido pondered. “I wonder if that’s what shaped their good nature.”

Coren thought on his own. “It doesn’t seem fair though. Let them be a little meaner. It isn’t worth what happened to them. What’s still happening to them.”

“I don’t know if you could change something like that.”

Coren sat up in his bed and faced Lido. “Lemme ask you something... if you could change one thing of the past, what would it be?”

“I dunno,” Lido said, staring at the ceiling. “I guess it would be... the cave-in. I always wonder what it would be like if Pollen’s father were still around.”

“Yeah, the cave-in...” Coren remembered.

“Wouldn’t you? I mean, you lost your father then too.”

“No. It wasn’t my father. Just a friend of a relative of a friend. I never knew my father. Or my mother. What about your own parents?” Coren asked. “Don’t you ever wonder about them?”

“Sure I do,” Lido said. “But if I met them now, I wouldn’t know them. They’re strangers to me. I don’t think I could change something in the past. You would have no idea how the present would turn out.”

“Funny coming from you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Cuz... it’s you. We always thought if anyone would change the world, it’d be you. You were always trying to make Kameryn shape up.”

“Little things like that, yeah...”

Coren yawned and turned in his bed to face away, on his more comfortable side. “You’re the one who decided to defend that girl. You didn’t even know who she was.”

“I guess there’s a difference between changing the past and changing the future. One’s a lot more frightening.”

“Which one?” Coren asked, his voice noticeably fainter.

Lido thought about that, unable to answer.

“That’s what I... thought.” He was dozing off quickly. It was a long day for both of them. “Remind me to get the recipe for that bug soup sometime... you’d never go hungry if you ate bugs... so many bugs in the world.” Coren’s voice was soon replaced by the soft sounds of his breathing.

For the life of him, Lido couldn’t understand how Coren fell asleep so easily; Coren didn’t seem to have any fear or anxiety. He had two states: calm and hungry. But Lido was far from sleep. He thought about the masked men, the girl, but mostly he thought about Bork’s story. There were things he hated about the world, but he wasn’t the one to change things. Sure, he wanted to, but it wasn’t his place.

These thoughts churned around in Lido’s head, finally wearing him out, and he soon joined Coren in slumber.