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A City in the Mist

There was a small tree, a sapling, prodding through the dirt floor in the middle of the stone atrium. Above, the blue sky could be seen, but not by the leaves of the poor withered sapling, it seemed to weep and sigh as it took one last reach toward the nourishing sunbeams before collapsing onto the tension of its rubbery trunk.

Placing his hands over the tree, he could feel its life escaping through its tiny form and dissipating in the air. His hands like magnets, pulled it together and began pumping back through its chalky skin, through the veins and roots. The sapling absorbed the essence like a sponge, expanding and growing before his eyes. Like a snake, the tree shot from the ground, wriggled its way to the skylight and opened its branches up like a diver rising from the deep, dark sea, breaking through the waves and embracing the sunlight.

As the last buds on the lowest branches opened to stare into the sun, they twisted slight, looking down on him, contracting and swelling as if adjusting to the first light of day.

“Gwood mornin”

“Good morning.” For a second, Lido forgot where he was. The voice he had just heard was being processed in his mind, comparing itself to recent memories as he put together this ceiling he had never seen in full light.

He sat up to see Bork at the door looking over them.

“Gwah!” he screamed and bolted from the doorway, disappearing downstairs.

Coren looked over at Lido then up at his ears. “Uh oh.”

Lido caught on and quickly grabbed around for his hat. “We better find him,” he said as he tied it on. Coren was already back in his boots.

Downstairs, Bork was nowhere to be found. In fact, there didn't seem to be anyone in the house.

Outside, they found Rork, the youngest, doing cartwheels in the mud. When he saw them, a huge grin lit up his face as he stood and waved violently, mud flying off in all directions. "Friends! Friends!"

His demeanor didn't show signs of fear, so they approached him. "Do you know where Bork is?" Lido asked.

"Gwe'm no see'm," Rork replied. "Gwome! Gwe gan zhow you aronna down!"

"Maybe after we find your brother," Lido responded kindly.

"Nah," Rork said, grabbing Lido's arm with his muddy hand. "He no doin' anadin' fun. Gwome wid gwe."

In a flash, Rork was giving Coren and Lido a tour of the town. From what they could see, the city was completely self-sufficient. Everything they needed was grown or harvested from the trees or the swamp. A group of Mydians armed with machetes cut down reeds to make ropes and baskets. Another group of Mydians armed with baskets collected fuzzy poms from trees, which would be spun into thread for cloth. A third group of Mydians, armed with spongy mesh nets reeled in a school of slimy, wormy fish.

"I think that's what we ate last night," Lido prodded Coren, making sure to be quiet so as not to offend the locals.

"I don't care," Coren retorted. "It was still delicious."

Rork's tour came to a finale at a specific grove of trees. "An' dis issa bes' place 'a glimb drees."

He took off up one of the trees like a monkey, getting about twenty feet in the air before swinging across branches over their heads to the tree on the other side of the grove.

"Gwome on up!" he offered. Lido and Coren were horrified by this prospect.

“We really need to find your brother,” Lido said.

Rork sighed. “An’ you no fun eider. Bork wenddooda cidy sgware.”

“The city square?” Lido confirmed.

“In da middo.”

“Right.”

Coren rolled his eyes as Lido thanked their guide for the information. The boys darted away to the center of town.

Pollen, Kameryn, and Merci traveled across the dewy plains, their bodies growing tired and weak from the distance. They stopped to rest at night, but had no food to eat and no way to eat it.

For some time, they traveled purely on Merci’s charisma, but soon even she stopped pointing out every beautiful fixture of the landscape. The sun merely burned their eyes. The flowers only mocked their condition.

Pollen and Kameryn often contemplated quarreling with each other, trying to discover which of them had set them on the wrong path with no clear direction and no way to survive themselves. But they were too hungry, too tired.

It began to rain again, as it does when clouds hit mountains. Pollen turned to see the mountain he had called home his whole life, wondering if he would ever return, if it was too late to return now. But he looked again into the face of the girl he had come this far for, perhaps too far.

He saw Kameryn, dragging with him that ridiculous sword. It was notably weighing heavily on his hip. His left leg dragged much more than his right. The footprints he left would testify to that. If Kameryn dropped dead, they could use his sword to cut him open, but... no

way to cook him. There was little wood in this part of the valley, and all of it wet. Beside that, he couldn't imagine the pretty little face of his desired one covered in that bastard's guts.

They plodded forward, the three of them, not really sure if they would reach anything, if they would be found, if they would simply drop dead in that valley, and be found decades later by the next group of sojourners who happened to be travelling that way.

His senses were failing. First, his nose was filled only with the smell of his sweat, but he soon became desensitized to that. Then his vision began dulling, his head dropping, and all he could see was the ground he tread on. Then his hearing, which before carefully monitored and recorded each breath he and his companions took, each step, everything they stepped on, all these sounds were soon overcome by a faint roar. The song of death, perhaps? Or maybe even...

"Is that a waterfall?" Merci's voice broke through Pollen's vacuous mind like a bolt of lightning. He focused every ounce of energy that remained to lift his head. Ahead, he could make out the faint image of two peaks, something he remembered from stories and fairy tales.

"Cascade!" he finally called out, his memory returning. The place in question was a bit of a legend. Not that its existence was ever called into question, but it was more of a peculiarity than a functioning town, though some would say it was a haven. Cascade was the philosopher's town. Built over a waterfall by brilliant engineers, surrounded by waters impossible to take a boat through, the only entrance to the town was one of the draw bridges on either side. The city within was built on different levels. The main level, the level the bridges were attached to was several stories above the water level. Slightly below that, built into the lower foundation the city was constructed on, were more houses and buildings, making the best use out of the space. From there, giant pillars held the city over the waterfall.

More importantly, however, was the fact that the base of the waterfall poured into Lake Poerra, the final border between them and Nebarra.

A new sense of vigor overtook the crew, and they nearly dashed up the slope to the city before them. It was still a bit of a walk, however, and it was long after midday when they finally reached the drawbridge.

“Now, remember, this is a pacifist town,” Pollen warned them. “And strongly. They might not take to well to certain parts of your costume.” He made a motion down to Kameryn’s sword.

Kameryn lightly glided his hand past Pollen’s flute, clipped to the strap across his chest. “There’s certain parts of your costume they might find offensive as well.” Merci giggled in spite of herself.

“I’m serious. You might seriously want to think about ditching it.”

Kameryn’s face took a serious tone. “I’m not gonna ditch the sword. Besides, it’s mostly decorative.”

“Pollen it’ll be fine,” added Merci.

“Whatever, forget it,” relented Pollen, a little overheated.

They crossed over the drawbridge and under the gates into town. Cascade was a beautiful city. Large columned buildings lined the roads. Occasionally they would pass over grates in the road that must have led all the way down to the water below.

They found a little café called The Steel Fork and sat down at a table. There were few other patrons at this time, being hours before lunch.

Now, Pollen’s mother was the best cook in her town, possibly the best cook on Mount Hian, but neither Pollen nor Kameryn could recognize a single ingredient on the menu. Recognizing their embarrassment, Merci made suggestions for them. Though they may have questioned her when their food arrived, they were so hungry they ate it quickly.

“My, my, what famished little children,” the waiter mused. “I’ll just leave the bill here.”

Pollen and Kameryn looked at the bill and then each other, suddenly realizing what little money they had. Luckily, Merci intervened by placing a stack of gold coins on the table.

“Here, sir, this should cover it.”

The waiter eyed the coins suspiciously, picking one up and turning it over in his hands. “I’m sorry, ma’am, but Faction coins are not welcomed here.”

She tried her best to keep her composure, remembering her diplomatic training. “Surely, the gold in the coins is enough to cover the bills, then.”

“Unless you have enough to cover the smelting process of these hideous things, I doubt this to be true.”

The boys intuitively rustled through their pockets, coming up with whatever money they had, but the waiter simply shook his head. “Wait here,” he said as he turned and walked toward the back.

Before the three had time to agree on whether or not to run, they were approached by a rotund man in an apron.

“Now there seems to be some discrepancy concerning the bill,” said the owner, a stocky older man with white hair and a red puffy nose.

Merci spoke. “I’m sorry, sir, but all we have is Lucre. If you can’t accept that, then there must be a bank nearby where we can get it exchanged for you.”

“Young lady,” smirked the owner, “you seem to be confused about where you are. Faction coins are not accepted anywhere in town, now if you can’t pay in the correct currency...”

The waiter returned and whispered something to the owner, gesturing slightly to the other side of the café. The others took little peeks, but there were a few patrons there, and none seemed to be acknowledging the waiter’s testimony.

The owner grabbed a handful of lucre from the table and gave them a transparent grin.  
“The issue’s been resolved. Please have your leave.”

“Who...” started Merci.

“The issue’s been resolved,” repeated the owner, more forcefully. “Please have your leave.”

Merci stood and waved towards the other side of the café. “Thank you.” None of the patrons turned around. Disappointed she followed the boys out.

“What was that about?” muttered Kameryn.

“He sure was acting funny,” said Merci.

“You don’t think those men followed us here, do you? Maybe beat us here?”

Realizing they were talking to each other again, Pollen felt the need to interrupt. “Merci, maybe you should lie low while I find a boat to take us down river.”

“That’s probably for the best,” agreed Kameryn.

“We’ll wait for you at the Central Library,” said Merci, wrestling something from her wrist. She handed Pollen a glittering bracelet. “Here, try to sell this. It should get us enough to buy our way onto a boat.”

“Don’t worry, ma’am, I’ll have you home soon,” Pollen said with a bit of confidence.

“Thank you,” she said, and gave him a quick peck on the cheek. Then she and Kameryn turned away and walked toward the library. Pollen smiled to himself shortly, before noticing how they’d grouped off. Disappointed again, he took off in search of transportation.

A pair of robed figures passed by, conversing wildly.

“And what would you propose we do with the rest of those?”

“Certainly some sort of foundation can be accomplished...”

“Excuse me, sirs,” interrupted Pollen. “I was looking to find a boat to rent. Do you know of where I might find one?”

“A boat,” laughed one of the men. “Do you wish to ride the falls?”

“Quite a man who rents a ship for his own demise. A level of frugality I’ve never seen before.”

The men continued down the road, laughing to themselves, making jokes back and forth to each other.

Pollen was having issues, but Kameryn and Merci had troubles of their own.

Not too long after they’d split from Pollen, they realized they were being followed. They weren’t sure at first, but as they turned down alleys, there was no doubt.

“We just made a figure eight,” whispered Kameryn. “He’s definitely following us.”

“What should we do?”

“Maybe we can lose him in this museum.”

They climbed the stairs of a large columned building and went through the large double doors. Kameryn got a glance back at caught the man tailing them. He was clad in a gray robe that covered him from his neck down. But from a slit or a wrinkle, Kameryn caught a sharp reflection. Seemed he wasn’t the only one in town who wouldn’t claim to be a pacifist.

The museum was full of books and parchments and stuffed animals and like the rest of the town, old intellectuals clad in togas.

They separated between some bookshelves, turned through some displays, and joined back together on the second floor in perfect synchronization.

“Were you followed?” asked Merci.

“No, were you?”

She shook her head and the two approached the second story window cautiously. To their dismay, their pursuer was still waiting outside, across the street, leaning against a lamp post, staring up at them.

Merci looked over to Kameryn, who was running his hand over his sword. She tapped the shoulder of a philosopher who was scanning over a bookshelf. “Excuse me, sir, but is there a back door out?”

“Back door,” mused the philosopher. “Back door? Why would there be a back door when the front door is as big as it is?” He reshelved a book and continued his scan, giggling as he did. “Back door?”

“Enough of this,” growled Kameryn. He turned and ran down the staircase, through the museum and back into the street.

The stranger didn’t move as Kameryn approached, he remained against the post.

“Who are you? Why are you following us?” Kameryn drew his sword and grabbed the stranger by the collar. “Answer me. Draw your sword.”

The stranger remained unresponsive. Kameryn tried his best to agitate the man, but he was much sturdier than he appeared.

Finally the stranger shoved Kameryn away, sending him to the ground, his sword sent several yards away. The robed man turned his attention toward the stairs, kneeling down and bowing his head. Merci stood at the top of the staircase.

“Your most honorable majesty, I give my sword in your honor.” He drew his sword and laid it on the ground in front of him.

Kameryn dropped his sword arm to his side. “Majesty?”

In the city square, beneath the large pavilion, Bork spotted them first and called out to them. “Lido! Gworen!” He waved his arms frantically as he approached them. “Gwe’m sorry about bein’ scared dis morning. Id’s juz dad no one’s zeen a Gwedon aroun’ here in so long.”

“A Gwedon?” Suddenly the similarity between Creedon and Gwedon became inexcuseably apparent to Lido. “No... I’m not a Creedon.”

Bork looked more confused than disappointed. “Bud you ‘ave da poindy ears. Doesn’t dad maig you a Gwedon?”

“Gwedon?” repeated a Mydian nearby.

Others joined in. “Gwedon? Gwedon? Poindy Ears?” Soon the square was filled with Mydians hooting and whispering about the legendary creature.

Lido and Coren were surrounded. “What do we do?” Lido whispered to his companion.

“I don’t know. Take off your hat.”

“Why?”

“I dunno. Just do it.”

But Lido didn’t have to. A green hand made its way through the horde and gently pulled the hat off Lido’s head, his ears revealing in a triumphant manner.

An instant hush came over the crowd. They didn’t croon, they didn’t bow, they didn’t cheer or dance. They simply stared, silently at Lido. It was the same situation as dinner the night before, as if the entire city were now awaiting his move.

Unlike before, it was Bork who was the first to speak.

“Fwends!” Bork called out, standing before Lido and Coren with his arms outstretched to the crowd. “Gwe will nod be swabes anymore! Da Gwedons have returned to helb gwe away from da swabeherders.”

He turned and looked back at the boys, a look of desperation in his face, his eyes pleading for their help.

A fierce determination overcame Lido, and he stepped forward to stand at Bork’s side. “We can beat the Slavers!” he announced to wild applause. “But we’ll have to do it together.” This was a concept they were very familiar with.

His name was Maxim Danglin. He was a soldier in the Nebarrese Army, until about half a year ago. He was a deserter.

He had joined the army at a young age. For the boys in his little town, that was the thing to do. Of course, back then, there was no prospect of fighting. The army had no point. It was just something to do. So he and a few of the other boys left their homes and went to Nebarra City. But the army was much different than they thought it would be. Shortly before they had joined, the army came under the control of a zealous ex-Faction Paladin by the name of Harrison Reed. A man whom would much later be disgraced from his post, and demoted to becoming the bodyguard of a wayward princess.

Nevertheless, army training became tough. It was much more demanding than they had expected, but there was no way they could return home as failures, so they stuck through it.

Eventually they all sloughed off the soft skin of their youth and emerged as soldiers. Maxim was very deft in the field, early on being singled out for his tracking abilities which he had inherited from his father, a skilled hunter, and Maxim was enrolled in Scout Training.

It was there that he was under the command of Sergeant Miara, a dog-faced, angry man, who decided to single out Maxim and another soldier, Hanlin, to be the examples for the rest of the troop.

The pair became friends in their mutual adversity, but soon the scrutiny became too much for Hanlin, who convinced Maxim to leave with him, and they made their escape. Using their training to both make their way through the forests and hide their tracks from the rest of the troop, they made their way north to Cascade.

Just before crossing the river over the border into Monta, however, Miara and the company caught up to them. Hanlin was killed in the escape.

“Sadly,” Merci added, “most of those units were disbanded probably a mere couple of months, maybe weeks after you escaped.”

“I know,” Maxim reconciled. “But thinking it over, I think it may have been the right choice. I know Hanlin would have thought so. We were receiving death threats from some of the other soldiers as it was. It was almost as if Miara wanted us to desert, as a skills assessment.”

“So why return now?” Kameryn inquired.

“Well, the funny thing about deserting to a pacifist city full of constant ponderers, is that you get caught up in it. The last six months, I’ve thought a lot about peace. And war. I don’t blame the army for what happened to Hanlin. That was one man’s transgression. I still feel that same pride that was so deeply impressed in me. I want to serve my country.

“To a soldier, the government is just a flag to be captured or protected. But to a citizen, the law means something. I know that now.

“I realized who you were in the café, and knew I had to help you. I just didn’t know how at first. But now I know it is my duty to deliver you safely to the castle.”

Kameryn stepped past Maxim, cornering Merci. “Yeah, let’s get to the part where you’re a majesty.”

“I’m sorry, I... I thought it would be safer if I didn’t tell you.”

“So who are you then?”

“My name is Merciella duNebarra, and yes, I am the Princess of Nebarra. But everything else was true. Please don’t be mad.”

It was then that Pollen approached, holding in his hand a slip of paper. He waved it in the air voraciously as he approached. “I think I found us a boat across the lake, if we can answer this riddle...” He stopped in his tracks when he saw the grave faces on his companions, and the new man dressed in a gray robe. “What’d I miss?”

“She’s a princess,” Kameryn blurt out.

Pollen dropped his arms and cocked his head, as if the contents of his brain had suddenly shifted. “You’re a princess?”

“Can we talk about this someplace a little less public, please?” Merci pleaded.

Merci got her wish, and Maxim led them to the place he had been staying. It was a small room in a hostel complex on the lower level of town. Though it was much less bright and a little more damp than the upper level, this location had a certain charm of its own. Much closer to the falls, this level was a little louder than others, and much space was given to the pillars that held the city up.

The hostel was a wood and stone lodge, with two stories and long hallways that ran along the edge of the level, overlooking the falls.

Maxim’s room was very cozy, just a table, a stove, and a bed. Maxim offered the Princess a seat at the table and she took it, motioning for the others to sit as well. Kameryn shook his head, opting instead to lean against the wall.

Merci opened her mouth, but it was Kameryn who spoke first.

“So, how long have you been a Princess?”

“My whole life,” she replied, taking the jab seriously. “Fifteen years.”

“That a good job? Good pay?”

“It is, actually.”

“Kameryn, just leave her alone,” Pollen burst out.

“That’s a great idea,” Kameryn growled, kicking himself away from the wall and making his way to the door.

Merci stood from her chair. “Kameryn, wait!” She began to follow him, but Pollen stood in her way.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of this.”

Hearing the door open again, Kameryn turned to see who followed. “I didn’t think you had a head on you, Kean,” he said, a little impressed by Pollen’s perceived intelligence.

“I’m not coming with you,” he replied.

“Oh... good. Then you are as stupid as I thought you were. I like being right.”

“Look, Kameryn. I really think we need to do this, you know, see the Princess home safe. We already came this far...”

“She’s already got her knight in shining armor, Pollen. I think she’s good to go.”

Pollen’s face turned sour, as if someone had smeared rotten mustard right under his nostrils. “Is that what this is about? You don’t have a chance anymore so you’re cutting out?”

“If it is,” Kameryn argued, “I’m wondering why you haven’t arrived at the same conclusion.”

“She needs our help.”

“What about your friends, then? Lido and Coren, just out there somewhere, hostages of some crazy guerrillas? Lido I could care less about, but Coren... he does yardwork.”

“You know, I never would have pegged you for anything but a selfish person. I like being right too.”

Kameryn turned, but didn’t leave. He stood and looked over the balcony onto the water below. Pollen watched him for a moment, but soon had his fill and returned to the doorway.

“Pollen – wait.”

The bard stopped, his hand still on the doorknob. “Yeah?”

“What do you think made Lido do what he did? What is it about him?”

“You mean how he can risk his life without hesitation? To be honest, I really have no idea.”

“Hmm.” Kameryn grabbed a loose thread on his shirt, twisted it off, and let it dangle in the wind a few seconds before letting it go. It danced through the air, looping and swirling before becoming too miniscule to make out against the horizon. “You know, next time I see him, I’ll have to ask him.”

He stepped away from the balcony and started to the staircase.

“Be careful, Kameryn,” Pollen called down to him, his request unanswered.