

VI Home

The trip home was a completely different journey than the trip away for Kameryn. There was little on his mind. He pushed Pollen and the Princess out of his thoughts and just focused on his walk. Merci was right, though. The mountains were beautiful.

Sometime before high noon, Kameryn sat on a rock to rest. Before him, a flower-painted valley sprawled north, back to his home. And, though it went against the very foundations of his principles, he smiled.

Suddenly he became aware of the weight on his side and pulled the sword from its sheath. It really was a beautiful blade. The metal of it seemed to reflect a reddish glow in the sunlight. The onyx orb in the center of the hilt absorbed that light. The crest of Blackstone, the world's greatest blacksmith, seemed to smile at him. It brought him joy, and at this moment in his life he was ever so grateful to have it.

"Think you can stand up to me?" he smirked menacingly at the pine sapling before him. "A bigger mistake you could not make."

He took a swipe at the plant, an explosion of needles in the blade's wake.

"Oh look, you brought some friends." With a quick glance over his shoulder, Kameryn spun around, the sword as a pendulum, striking the heads from a battalion of wildflowers.

A triumphant grin covered his face as he turned back to the small tree.

"Oh? What's that you say? An army?" Kameryn peered behind him and faced the valley again. "We'll see about that."

He darted down the hill at full speed, slashing his way through waves and waves of flowers. He laughed in delight as petals and leaves flew around him in every color imaginable.

He hacked his way clear through the valley towards the slope of the mountain, where he came upon a lone pine tree.

“You must be the king of this land... I’ve come to reclaim the throne. I have fought my way past your son, and his goons, and through your entire army. Do you really think I’ll have trouble getting through you? Draw your sword, lest you die a coward.”

A gust of wind blew a branch toward Kameryn’s face, but was sliced clean off with the swing of his sword, the severed limb flung harmlessly away.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the blade, a small stream of sap now running down the side, engulfing his attention so fiercely, his mind seemed to be completely silenced.

With an explosive fury, Kameryn swung his sword at the side of the tree, relieving the entire section of its bark. Again and again he swung and thrust his blade into the tree’s trunk, chopping into it as if he were wielding an axe.

At once his sword drove so deep into the tree that he was unable to pull it back out. His hands clenched against the handle so hard, his fingers turned bright red, like ripe berries ready to burst. He kicked against the tree with all his might but the sword remained wedged into the wood.

Kameryn collapsed to the ground, out of breath. He took one long inhale, jumped to his feet, and ran into the hilt with his entire weight, finally freeing it from its prison.

Now reunited with his prized blade, Kameryn let out a bestial roar so fierce the surrounding area immediately cleared itself of wildlife. His sword arched around his body, completely cleaving the trunk in two. He stood completely still as the top half of the tree flew inches from his face and toppled to the ground.

Once again cognizant, Kameryn gazed upon the fallen pine with an odd sense of remorse. Shaking these thoughts from his mind, he wiped the blade off on his pant leg, sheathed it, and began his ascent up the slope of Mount Hian.

“I don’t feel right about this. Not at all.”

Lido and Coren were walking along a line of ropespinner, happily and unanimously churning away at their task.

“It feels slightly like we’re taking advantage.”

“There’s nothing to worry about,” Coren assured him. “It’s the right thing.”

“It’s the Gwedon *cough* Creedon aspect of it. I know they spoke fondly of them, but you know how their history goes. They take everything in stride. But we know how the Creedon were... evil... oppressive. I’m almost positive they were enslaved before. It’s like we’re taking the guise of one slavemaster to overthrow another.”

Coren shrugged. “I’m sorry. I don’t really understand. We’re not going to take them as slaves. We’re the good guys.”

“It’s just the whole manipulation thing...” Lido trailed off as one of the Mydians approached them, holding the end of a rope, dragging along six or seven other weavers still finishing their work.

“Dissa gwood one?” she croaked.

Lido looked it over and then peered out at the swamp. “That looks real good. Good job.”

The Mydian leapt with excitement and ran her end of the rope back to her partners, giving them all a hug on her return.

“Look how happy they are when they’re serving,” Coren joked, absent-mindedly. “Maybe they’re better off as slaves.” He looked over at Lido, who was not enjoying the moment as much as the others.

“What are we leading them into?” Lido scowled. “This is foolish. I’m gonna get everyone killed.”

Coren reached out his massive hands and placed them gently on Lido's shoulders. "Look, be calm. You came up with a really good plan. Besides that, by Bork's estimates, there will only be about twenty or so men. Even if it was double that, we would still outnumber them ten to one. It'll be a massacre."

Lido took a calming breath. "Yeah... I just hope we're on the winning side of it."

Much of the water that ran off Mount Hian and its neighboring peaks collected into small rivers and ponds that led to Cascade falls, which emptied down into Lake Poerra, a massive waterway that formed the border between Monta and Nebarra. Upon that lake, a tiny raft with passengers drifted as the sun was beginning to pass over.

Pollen sat at the bow of the raft, flute hovering around his mouth. The song he had played days before was lost to him now, as it had been when he was trying to write it. This had been the first time he had been away from his desk, his staff paper and pens, and his memory was beginning to fail. When he had played before, he was never far from the recorded notes, and the spontaneity he had felt in the gazebo at the Trade Fair was suddenly foreign to him. He accepted his defeat, but kept his flute at his lips, remembering the musician he once was.

The ripples of light that bounced sporadically away from the surface of the lake, the sun, gently strolling through a giant, cloud streaked sky, the tops of the trees in the distance, dancing with the wind, beckoning them closer – none of these things spoke to his heart. None put a tune to his lips. He was uninspired, until he turned around and saw the catalyst for his journey, a pair of deep blue eyes.

The tune returned to him, in full. It was as if the song were lacking any meaning until now. The song had a name.

It was melancholy, yet hopeful; honest, but dreamlike. In his mind, the notes painted a picture of a romance so vibrant, there weren't enough colors to convey it. A love that shone so

bright it burned through the canvas. It was a bittersweet ballad, but it ended the way it began, melancholy, but hopeful.

He let out a few breathes before he fully moved the flute away from his lips. Merci approached him. “You know, I never really told you how great you were at the Trade Fair. You really are very talented.”

Pollen blushed. Not that he hadn’t heard that said before. He just very much enjoyed the way it sounded with her voice.

“Well... yeah.” He really wished he had a better grasp of words at that moment, but luckily, he didn’t need them.

“What was that song called?”

“The one I just played or the one I played then?”

“The one you just played.”

“Oh... that’s just a song I used to play myself at night when I couldn’t fall asleep actually. The Trade Fair was actually the first time I played it whole. I never really named it.”

Merci’s eyes lit up. “You mean you wrote that?”

Suddenly Pollen felt like he had her hooked. “Yeah, I write songs a lot...” Unfortunately, his mouth was done for the day.

“We have a court composer at the castle... oh, he’s so unoriginal. Everything he writes sounds exactly like the Royal Nebarrese March.”

“Oh, I know that.” Pollen played it jauntily on the flute.

“That’s it,” laughed Merci. “And he didn’t even write that. Play another song... one that you wrote.”

“Ok,” said Pollen, with a grin so big it nearly fell off the sides of his face. “Lemme think of one... Um, ok.”

He began to play, but almost immediately afterwards, Merci's attention shifted. "Maxim, where are you taking us?"

"Down the river."

Pollen dropped his flute. He could tell from the Princess's tone that something was wrong.

"Why are you taking us down the river? We just need to cross the lake."

"Sorry, can't do that."

"Why not?" Pollen asked, rising to his feet, feeling a sudden rush of blood to his fists, readying themselves to be weapons. "Take us across the lake," he snarled, forcefully.

Merci stood next to him and put a hand on his arm. There was no strength in it, but it was enough to hold him back. "Why can't you take us across the river, Maxim?"

"You ever heard of the Grecka?"

Pollen felt the blood leaving his fists and flowing straight into his face. Hoping no one else was aware that he was about to attack a trained soldier, he sat back down as subtly as possible.

"They're some sort of animal, right?" Merci responded.

"Oh, they're some sort of animal, all right," Maxim laughed, though a small bit of pain shone through.

Half wolf, half rat... the Grecka *used* to be scavengers, but they began multiplying too much, and there was less and less food for them. So they turned into hunters. It started with small animals, rabbits, squirrels, but as the Grecka grew bigger, so did their appetites.

It wasn't until a few years ago that the Grecka began hunting men. Much like beavers make dams, the Grecka began building traps in the water, waiting for boaters to crash against them so they could devour their corpses.

“A trip through the woods would be like walking through a beehive covered in honey,” he explained. “We’d be swarmed. I say we float down the river until Jasper, and from there, we travel home in style.”

There was a hole in the story, and Pollen felt the need to redeem himself. “If the woods are filled with these Grecka, then how did you make it to Cascade in one piece?”

Maxim didn’t face him to answer, he turned away and kept his hands firmly on the tiller. “Hanlin,” was his soft reply, escaping his lips after a prolonged silence. “That was the second time he saved my life.”

Though the Magwe were cheerful and hopeful by nature, the afternoon had turned somber. They were waiting for hours for word from Rork and Forn, who had volunteered to scout ahead, and the anticipation was unbearable. Lido had run short of inspiring things to say long before, and unable to fulfill the Mydians’ wishes for magic tricks, waited in the second floor of Bork’s home, looking through a small window while Coren snored nearby in his bed.

The looming battle did not frighten him. He was no warrior or tactician, but he was very confident about the battle ahead. He was much more worried about the aftermath. Who would take care of the Mydians? Would they be safe forever, or would the backlash be swift? Would they take this victory as a sign of the second coming of the Creedon? The thought made Lido shiver.

As he pondered, he paced about the room, stopping finally by his bed from the night before, and looked down upon his cap. He had not worn it all day, the absense of its tightness welcome but not realized. He reached up and squeezed the very tips of his ears between his finger and thumb. They seemed longer than ever. Disgusted, he snatched the hat up and crammed them underneath.

It was a while after high noon when the slavers finally arrived. Rork and Forpin dashed into town well ahead of the aggressors, announcing that they were trudging through the swamp, delayed by the fallen tree they had left on the road. Everyone took to their places, and soon the slavers were there.

Lucien Den was both frightening and repulsive. A sickly looking figure in leather hides, he was a hunter of slaves and animals. He had done bounty hunting too, but for reasons unknown to him, it was frowned upon to cut trophies from those catches. His jacket, pants, and vest were lined with long, sharp teeth on the seams. He wore a large brimmed hat, which kept his face in shadow; his long stringy hair seemed to ooze from it.

He stepped into the center of the empty town, followed by his posse of about twenty men. Behind them, a pair of large carts were dragged by a pair of mules.

With a crack of his whip, he made his declaration. "You know I don't like to be kept waitin'," he snarled. "Get those escapees out here. And I'm gonna need eight more of ya."

He didn't wait long for a reply. There was no one there. "The hell's goin' on here?" He motioned to his men. "Search the houses. Tear things down. Rip this place apart... find those damn skuds."

"That won't be necessary." Lido announced from the doorway of the house facing the town's center, half of his body kept behind the doorframe. "The slave store is out of stock."

Lucien laughed to himself. "Unless you have a catapult in that other hand, boy, you might want to seriously consider retracting those words."

Lido revealed what was in his other hand, a cooking pot. Lucien and his men burst out laughing again.

With a nod and a quick point, Lucien sent three of his men to the house. They approached cautiously, but confidentially. When they were within spitting distance, Lido pulled the lid off the pot.

“Catch.” He popped the contents of the pot upward toward the middle of the three. A potato flew at his head, and he caught it with his hand. With a scream, he tossed the potato to the man on his right, who also screamed and tossed it to the man on his left. Lido ducked into the house, and was followed by the first man, still swearing over the burn on his hand.

As soon as he came through the door, Lido smacked him with the pot, sending him to the floor, tripping the man behind.

Lucien growled and sent the rest of the men to follow Lido, but as they approached, their legs suddenly flew out from under them, and one by one, the slavers were dragged into the waters of the swamp, long ropes hidden in the mud pulling them away.

Coren popped out of a back room and joined Lido in fighting the third man, using the door as a shield, he quickly disarmed him and sent him to the pile building up.

As Coren dusted off his hands, a volley of crossbow bolts came towards him. Quickly he slammed the front door closed and listened to the pat-pat-pat of arrowheads digging into the wood.

Lido was alone outside. Lucien unsheathed his cutlass and marched to the house. A few of the snares that had caught his men grabbed his legs, but he sliced the ropes with his sword. He uncoiled his whip and threw his arm back to prepare a crack at the young boy, but his arm was caught. Lucien turned slowly to face Bork, behind him was the population of the town, crawling out of the swamp, dragging with them the bound members of his team. Realizing he was surrounded and defeated, Lucien’s mind reverted to instinct. He whipped the handle of the whip around Bork’s legs and pulled on it, sending the Mydian to the ground.

Cutlass in hand, he made a mad dash toward Lido, catching Lido before he could get inside the door, grabbing him with his free hand. He yanked the boy from the building and dropped him down to the ground. “What’s a nice little boy like you doing out here in the swamp?”

Lucien noticed the odd placement of skin under the boy's hat and lifted it off with his blade. "A Creedon!" he cried, jumping up.

"Uze your majig!" one of the Mydians called out.

Lido struggled to his feet too, arms and legs balanced out to his sides, fumbling for some way to beat back the large man with the sword. His fear was visible, however, and was quickly picked up by Lucien, who was a little more knowledgeable about the way the world had turned. "Use your magic," he repeated, mockingly.

Slowly bending to his feet, Lido picked up a handful of dirt. Lucien took a step forward. Lido took a step back. As one's trepidations was showing, the other was quickly regaining his confidence. "I'd love to see a magic trick before I kill you," Lucien chortled.

"Ok..." Lido muttered, buying what little time he could. "Here's one called CORENNOW!" Lido tossed the dirt in his hand into the air; it exploded against the balcony above, raining down on both heads.

Lucien spit the dirt from his mouth, but the real magic was a 200 pound Montan on the other side of the door he was standing on, who leapt onto it, pinning Lucien under that poor slab of wood.

Coren poked Lucien's nose with his finger. "Ta da."

The slavers were disarmed and sent away, amid the celebration of the citizens of Magwul.

"Gwe did id!" Dugan exclaimed. "Gwe'll never habba be slabes again!" He cheerfully danced up to Lido and Coren, to thank their liberators, but the Mydians were not greeted with the same joyful faces they made.

"Don't celebrate yet," Lido warned. "It's not over."

"Gwhy nod?" one asked.

“They’re going to find more slavers, and they’ll be back.”

“And den gwe’ll do id again!”

The crowd cheered.

“Da Gwedons’ll sabe us!”

“No, no, wait!” As Lido regained the village’s attention, he quickly became aware of the absence of what to tell them.

He looked back at Coren, who simply shrugged.

“We can’t fight the slavers forever. A lifetime of war is no life at all.”

“So gwadda gwe do?”

“Run. Hide.” Those were the only ideas that made sense.

“Gwhere do gwe go?”

“Deeper. Deeper into the swamps.”

“Widda Skuzzigs? Noooo...”

“Why not?”

“Dey don’ lige us.”

“Dey dink gwe’s weag.”

“Tell them what happened here today. Tell them that you fought off the slavers. Tell them that you have a common enemy, and, and... you have to work together.”

“You gome widdus.”

“Yeah! Yeah!”

Lido and Coren shook their heads subtly, unable to concoct a pliable excuse.

“Dey’re righd,” Bork announced, breaking through the crowd. “Dis is gwe’s fighd. Gwe muz do id.”

“Gwe need a leader.”

“Yes! Da Gwedon would maig an ezzelend leader.”

The crowd cheered again, but Lido waved his arms in the air, shaking his head. “No... no... not me.” He turned to his side, where Bork stood, though backing up slowly, guessing what Lido was about to say. “Bork?”

“Gwe’ m nod a leader,” Bork plead, shaking his head. “Nobody gwould follow gwe.”

Fumbling around in his pocket, Lido came across a small metal object he had forgotten was there. He pulled it out to look at it. It was the bookmark he had found with the Creedon symbol, so long ago, back in Foothill. “Everybody look!” he called out, holding the bookmark high in the air.

The crowd turned and stared at the object with awe.

“This magic bookma... bracelet contains the leadership power of the Creedon. I will now present it to the most worthy leader amongst you.”

The crowd was captivated, though secretly, they all took a mental step backward, fearing they would be the one with the burden of leadership. But Lido simply reached his other hand out to his side and grabbed the wrist of Bork, standing next to him.

“Bork, may you lead your people to prosperity.” He tied the bookmark around Bork’s wrist. The Mydian couldn’t help but smile proudly as he could feel the power of the Creedon flowing through him.

When Lido was finished, Bork stood mightily with his fist in the air, displaying his newly acquired trinket for all to see.

With admiration and applause, the village of Magwul celebrated their new leader.

The little gourd houses remained in place. The nets remained halfway in the water, the looms still had cloth stretched between their legs. But the Mydians were leaving. They abandoned their homes and possessions, took only each other, jumped into the water one by one

and swam away to the sanctuary of the deeps from which they emerged so many generations ago.

“Gwome widdus,” plead Bork.

Lido shook his head. “We have other places we need to be. Besides, we’re not that good of swimmers.” He was trying to bring joy into the situation, but Bork remained solemn.

“Gwhere will you gwo?”

“We have to go back home. Find out if our friends are safe.”

“Gwe sdill don’d dink gwe’m ready.”

“You’ve got that bracelet.”

“Gwe know id’s nod magic.”

“Then why are you still wearing it?”

“Da oders needa see id, so day know gwe’m da leader. Alzo id’s preddy.”

“Don’t worry,” Lido said, comforting him. “I know you’ll be a great leader.”

Behind him, Coren waved to the family and soon they disappeared into the murky water. Before long, those two boys were the last inhabitants of the once jovial village. With a nod, they picked up the pack of supplies the Magwe had given them and began their journey back to Mount Hian.

Kameryn sensed that he was nearing his home, and his paced picked up. But the closer he was to his home, the more he felt that something was wrong. There were no sounds, there was no life. And then he caught his first glimpse of the rubble that was his hometown.

Without a thought, Kameryn dashed through the shells of buildings, trying to find some recognizable landmark or the remaining pieces of his home.

Tears began to well in his eyes and his chest burned as if his heart were replaced by a hot coal. His bones ached with every step through the crumbling street.

His head spun left and right, taking in the obliterated landscape all at once, as if trying to see through some elaborate illusion. But it was all too real.

He managed to stumble his way to where the center of town would have been. The city spun around him, he could barely focus on one feature for more than a second before moving on to the next. His eyes blurred and the sky grew large and covered his vision. Finally he collapsed, face to the moaning sky, in the town he once knew.