

VIII

Last Stretch

They had braved the dulled rapids, the wild unseen animals, and the slow, tranquil pace down the river. All in all, a successful, quiet ride.

The river was widening now, and the current was slowing even more, a sign, Maxim suggested, that they were nearing the delta, and would soon be in Jasper.

They felt at ease, something Pollen hadn't felt in a few days. Merci lie asleep on a bag of wheat, Maxim stood by the tiller, alert but obviously falling asleep. It was a lazy afternoon, floating down the river. But it was short lived, for across the water, near the south bank of the river, he spotted a long dark shadow in the water.

"A Grecka," he whispered to Maxim, tugging on his arm. "Look."

"Where?" Maxim asked, getting his spear in hand. "I don't see one."

"It was in the water, over there. Do you see it?"

Merçi had awoken, listening to their conversation and slowly rose to her feet. "You saw a Grecka?" she whispered. "Where is it?"

Pollen pointed to the shadow in the water. "There by the bank."

"Oh wait," Maxim said calmly, slowly lifting his spear arm over his head. "I see it now."

In a quick, lightning-like move, the spear flew from Maxim's hand, shooting into the water like an arrow.

Pollen jumped as the dark shape leapt from the water, and landed lifelessly on the surface. Pollen crept over to the edge of the raft to stare into the face of the log Maxim had just slain.

Behind him, the soldier burst out laughing. Pollen gave him a stern look. "You knew the whole time."

“Yeah... we’re too far downstream for the Grecka,” Maxim chuckled, as he steered the raft close to the bank, all the while, stripping down to his skivvies.

“What are you doing?” Merci asked, startled.

“Sorry, it was just too good a chance to pass up, but I need to get my spear back.” He jammed the tiller into the soft floor of the river and propped his armor up on it, leaving the semblance of a soldier standing at attention as he dove into the water.

“It did look like a Grecka,” Merci said to Pollen. “It would have fooled me too.”

“Thanks,” Pollen replied, his eyes still on the water, though he was more looking at her reflection than watching Maxim. In fact, he couldn’t even see Maxim through the murky water. “Where did he go?”

Thoomp. Behind them, a bolt appeared in Maxim’s armor, piercing it right where Maxim’s heart would have been. The armor collapsed, causing the tiller to come loose, and the raft began drifting down the river again.

“Get down,” Pollen snapped, the two instinctively took to their bellies and ducked as closely behind the provisions as they could. “Where did it come from?”

“The north bank,” Merci whispered. Pollen peaked his head over the sacks carefully, but was unable to make out anything before his fear pulled his neck back down.

“I can’t see anything. Do you think it’s that militia group?”

“Probably.”

He wasn’t sure how long it had been since the initial attack, but the lack of action made Pollen uneasy. “Do you think they’re gone?”

“Where would they go?”

Pollen popped his head up again, looking around into the forest. “Hello?” he called out, hoping someone civilized would answer. “Anyone there?”

From the corner of his eye, he could barely make out a shadowy figure in the woods, and a bolt came flying at him.

Splash. Pollen was in the water, being held down by Maxim. The soldier put a finger over his lips and disappeared back into the water.

“Did you see anyone?” the Princess asked, barely audible.

“No,” Pollen answered, treading water on the safe side of the raft.

The raft was moving now, subtly at first, but it was definitely being pulled by some unseen force away from the north bank and the assailant.

When it scrapped against the shore, neither Pollen nor Merci were prepared to move. They remained belly down against the wood slats or the rocky shore, listening intently for a sign from Maxim or their attacker.

The sign came in the form of a muffled scream as a masked man with a crossbow flew from the northern bank and landed face down in the water.

As if he could move through the very ground, Maxim appeared before his startled charges, wearing barely enough to stay modest. He dug through the crates on the raft and produced three cloaks. One was the grey robe he wore around the market. The other two were odd green contraptions that seemed to be woven of leaves.

“Put these on,” Maxim ordered as he tossed them before Pollen and Merci. “Keep your faces covered; you’ll still be able to see. And stay near that brush until the forest is clear.” He didn’t need to signal where to hide, and if he did, it wasn’t noticed by the boy he was giving orders to. At the moment, it was all too apparent what Maxim was prepared to do to ensure their safety, and the gravity of the moment kept his eyes fixated on the young man, barely older than himself, who was about to sacrifice himself to save them.

“Do not, under any circumstances, reveal yourself. If you reveal yourself, you reveal the princess, do you understand me?”

“Yes,” Pollen acknowledged, trying to make himself feel like a soldier, but not having that effect.

“Keep this on you,” Maxim said, shoving his spear’s width into Pollen’s stomach.

Pollen looked it over and gave Maxim a confused look. “I don’t know how to use this. Give me your sword.”

“Do you know how to use a sword?” Merci whispered to him.

Pollen thought it over. “Um... no.”

“The spear is better,” Maxim added. “Trust me. Now get to cover, and remember what I said. Under no circumstances.”

With their weapon in tow, the Princess and the Bard wriggled into their hiding spot, covered by the leaf cloaks that made them look like bushes, and did their best to settle into a spot that would give them the best view before they locked their bones and muscles into place.

The scene they witnessed was mostly a blur, as the gray cloak whisked through the trees, followed by a score of men in black, the same from the marketplace. Missiles flew perilously through the forest, digging into the soft earth or becoming embedded in the trunks of hapless oak trees, but Maxim was very careful to keep them from being aimed anywhere near the hiding eyes.

The soldier did his job of diverting and confusing the attackers, and the finale of his plan played out far from the eyes of those he was protecting. They had noticed, however, that the sounds of the fray had dropped considerably, and the rapid pattering footsteps turned into a smooth, rhythmic march. They sat helplessly, as the marauders returned to the clearing where the fracas began, merely passing through, carrying amongst them a long, thick package, wrapped in a gray cloak, bolts pinning it to the shape within, a red adhesive holding them fast in place. Some strange liquid oozed over Pollen’s eye, but he didn’t blink it away, he simply let it be as he stared wide-eyed at the now distorted scene that played out before him.

They watched in horror as the procession passed. Leaves fell and covered footprints. The sun passed over and sank into the west. Finally, as the last light was slowly pulled from the forest floor like the tide leaving the shoreline, an inconspicuous pair of bushes stood and mournfully plodded away from the scene.

Away from the Trade Fair, Foothill was a ghost town. The booths and stalls were cleared away so quickly and deftly, it were as if they were never there at all. When the trading was over, the town reverted back to its other economy – inns. And with over two hundred in town, the task of finding Kameryn’s father would prove difficult.

He wasn’t sure exactly why he was letting this man of ambiguous character lead him around, but at this point in his life, little made sense to Kameryn. He did not feel remorse or sadness or fear. He was blank. There was, however, one emotion that was soon to return to him.

He had ignored the posters at first; it was not uncommon for “wanted” signs to be distributed around Foothill. It was a very popular town after all. But it wasn’t long before Kameryn came face to face with the Faction’s newest most wanted criminal.

It was a crude drawing of a boy, medium-length blond hair, brown eyes, slightly pointy nose, dorky mouth no matter how neutral it was, and ears like spear-tips. It was Lido, wanted for the attempted kidnapping of a Nebarrese official. The shock that overtook Kameryn caused him to break the comfortable silence that had grown between him and his guide.

“I... I don’t understand. Lido was the one saving the Princess. Everyone saw that.”

“Horrd owns this town,” the Beggar replied, slipping gracefully into this new open-communication policy, “which means he controls the information, too. Fear is a powerful emotion. It can make someone doubt what they see right before their eyes. People fear the Creedon and Horrd is using that to his advantage.”

“Do you fear the Creedon?”

“They don’t exist anymore.”

Kameryn rephrased his question. “Did you fear the Creedon?”

“I have no reason to. But I know enough to say that no matter how much the general populace fear them; Horrd fears them even more.”

“Why?”

“I’m sure I don’t need to tell you this – but a man like Horrd is real good at making enemies.”

“Is that why you came to 12? To get back at him?”

The Beggar was careful how he worded his reply. “I don’t hold grudges. But I work for some people that would be very interested to see what Horrd looks like when he’s afraid. That makes them very interested in your friend.”

“He’s not my friend,” Kameryn replied, almost subconsciously.

“Whatever you want to call him, he’s very interesting.”

“I prefer not to get my entertainment from the insane asylum,” Kameryn muttered, barely audible.

“Hmm?”

“I said, ‘What’s the plan?’”

The Beggar was very careful about when and how much of his mysterious affiliation he was to reveal. It was apparent that he was a small piece of a very large information network that stretched across more land than most people were aware existed. The man himself played the part of a “Gatherer”, and was loath to even give Kameryn a name, which worked as Kameryn was not one to address him. In Foothill, they were supposed to meet someone called a “Hub”, basically someone who plants themselves into the local society and absorbs information.

Face-to-face meetings between Hubs and Gatherers were rare. There were ways for them to communicate between each other, and while Kameryn apparently watched while the Beggar

went through one of these transmission and had no idea. The entire operation seemed to operate on a completely different level than most could comprehend. Unfortunately, the messages they were able to send through their subliminal lines did not allow for the communication they needed at present, and a meeting had to be set up.

The Beggar's odd pursuit of his Hub led them clear across the city, past places Kameryn remembered from not too long ago. The street where he purchased his sword, the alley where he tortured Levy with it... the thought had passed through Kameryn more than once, that perhaps this series of actions could be held responsible for Curro and his men knowing about their hometown, and as much as he tried to convince himself that he was not to blame, the guilt was beginning to tear away at his innards. For a moment, he held his phantom pains as if they could be helped.

“Hungry?”

“Um... I suppose so.”

“Good, cuz we need to stop in here.”

It was another bizarre stop on a bizarrely specific tour. The Beggar had Kameryn order the tuna soup, complain at first that it was too cold, then sip two spoonfuls before stirring for thirty seconds and sipping again. He didn't mind, though. He was hungrier than he thought.

At the time, he had not realized how much his hunger had drowned out his guilt. As one subsided, the other chimed back in. He was lost in thought for a few minutes before realizing the Beggar was gone. Kameryn jumped from the table and dashed out the front door.

The sky had turned gray and gloomy, as small droplets of rain fell from the clouds. He did not see the Beggar, but remembered his aversion to public places and followed the pub around to its back door. There he found his companion, mournfully surveying some scrap of trash.

“Looks like the rain’s gonna set us back. Come on, I know a place we can stay. We’re gonna have to get you a mismatched set of pajamas first though...”

The sun was setting and they were growing weary. Armed only with Maxim’s spear and the clothes on their backs, they tread deeper into the forest, close together for fear of what lay beyond.

Once the sun had fully set, the forest became eerily quiet, and impossibly dark.

“I can’t see a thing,” whispered Merci, impulsively feeling the need to remain unheard.

“I guess we can’t do a thing till morning,” Pollen said. He held her close to him as he felt his way through the forest using the spear as a walking stick.

He came upon a large tree, and they decided to nestle in its roots.

“Which root do you want? The left one or the right one?” asked Pollen

“Which one do you want?”

“Um... I guess I’ll take the left one.”

“I’ll take the left one too.”

“I hardly think that’s appropriate for a princess.”

“That’s easy for you to say, you’ve got a spear.”

They fell asleep against the tree, hidden among its roots, the princess pressed against Pollen’s chest.

Something woke Pollen up. It wasn’t a noise so much as a feeling. It was very early morning now, he could barely make out some dark shapes. Trees, bushes, rocks... the Princess was gone. He groped around for the spear. Gone too.

Using the tree as a brace, he lifted himself from the ground and strained his eyes to their extent. She nor it were anywhere to be seen. He resisted calling out to her, though. Something was nearby, something unfriendly. He could feel it.

Either his eyes adjusted better or the sun came up, or both, but more details were coming into view. He gazed around on the ground, saw the leaves scattered from Merci and him entering from the night before. He couldn't see any other signs of movement, nothing obvious to someone who spent his life playing the flute. His eyes weren't very well trained. He used his ears.

The wind blew lightly from the northwest, pulling dead leaves from branches and dropping them gracefully to the ground. There was another sound with it. Breathing. Not from the Princess or anything human. Something dark and otherwise undetectable. It was calm at first, the air moving in and out in slow waves. Pollen turned his head slowly to pin-point the location of the sound. Just past his left shoulder. But then the noise stopped.

Pollen burst from the clearing, jumping first behind the tree, then sprinting through the forest. Behind him, he could hear something burst from the foliage, but he didn't dare turn to look. He ran like an Olympian, dodging trees and roots, ducking under branches, slipping between rocks.

He could feel the creature behind him, sweating and panting, but much less tired than he. An extreme sense of dooming was filling Pollen's heart. He had no chance of escaping whatever was behind him, he was quickly approaching the end of the line.

Actually, he never reached it. He tripped over a rock and landed in the dirt, skidding some, cutting up his palm and forearms on the rocks and branches on the ground. But he didn't have time to nurse these minor wounds, because immediately as he fell, a large dark shape leapt over him and alit facing away.

Pollen watched the large, black animal slowly turn to face him. Though it was massive, the creature was light and slender, with long spindly legs. On the top of its head, a lone horn broke through the fur. Pollen came face to face with it now. It had small, beady eyes, and a large mouthful of sharp teeth. It didn't growl or snarl, just breathed in and out. It was a Grecka, as Maxim had described, though it was alone.

Pollen crawled over onto his back and tried shuffling away, but the Grecka followed step by step. He scanned for some sort of weapon around, a large stick, a throwable rock, nothing was within his grasp. He shuffled back more, his hand came across something smooth and metallic, his flute. It broke from its strap when he fell.

With nothing to lose, he whipped the flute in front of him, a light whistle as he did. The Grecka stopped and stared at it curiously. Pollen made more quick jerks with it, releasing some tiny, faint sounds. The Grecka followed it closely with its gaze.

He brought it to its lips and starting playing a soft song, the Grecka remained interested, slowly approaching Pollen with very soft steps. It put its snout very close to the flute and sniffed around the air holes, its teeth baring as it came closer.

SKWAK! A sharp blast from the flute burst through the air. With a squeal, the Grecka jumped backwards and scampered back through the forest. Pollen quickly took this opportunity to dart the other way.

He thought he had outsmarted the creature, and even if he had, it didn't matter, because a few hundred feet away, he ran into three of its friends.

They didn't growl or roar or bark, the only noise they made was a sharp, long hiss, like a snake's, but wetter. In unison they encroached on the bard. He held his flute tightly in his hand, but he felt the same trick wouldn't work this time. In fact, it was probably that which led them here.

His back was against a tree now, and three sets of teeth were ready to meet him personally.

“Ha!” A sharp cry filled the air as a long shaft flew into one of the Grecka and flung it to the side. The middle one turned only to get the spear in its stomach and then be shoved into the third in one fluid movement. Merci ripped it from the Grecka to stab the final one, one foot on the pile she was making.

She peered over her shoulder to face Pollen and blew a strand of hair from her forehead. “Oh, good. You’re up. We should go.”

Sometime during the night, the Beggar and his Hub had made their meeting arrangements, vague as they were. The place was the Horseshoe Inn, that was all he knew. The Beggar had to turn his intuition to overdrive to find out which one was his man.

“What should I do?” Kameryn asked as the Beggar prepared to duck through the back door.

“Stay here,” the Beggar replied. “Try not to be seen by too many people.” With that, Kameryn was alone in that alley behind the inn. He was there for much longer than he had planned on, and suddenly the need to evacuate his bladder grew within him.

No one was around. With a shrug, he turned into the corner between the dumpster and the wall and began his business. It was an odd stream – long, but without much power behind it.

The sound seemed to echo loudly through the corridor, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He couldn’t stop mid-pee, even when another man came, turned to the wall, and began his business as well. It made Kameryn uncomfortable, but he was powerless.

“Nice day,” the stranger said. Kameryn caught an idea of the other man out of the corner of his eye, but was very careful not to look. He didn’t answer.

“Nice day,” the man repeated.

Kameryn simply nodded and awkwardly added a “mm.”

Unsatisfied, the stranger asked again. “You the guy?”

“...I’m A guy, yes.”

“Are the you gerrerrer?” he mumbled.

“Hmm?” By now, Kameryn had finished his business, but was thoroughly enthralled in this conversation.

“Are you the ga-rer-rer?”

“Wait, are you the Hub?”

“Hey! Whoa! I’m not saying anything about that.”

“I’m not the um... guy. He’s inside the inn.”

“Oooh... that’s what he meant by the two twigs. Thanks kid.” He turned to leave, but stopped, forgetting something important. “Hey, did you see that?”

Kameryn turned and looked, instantly feeling foolish. Of course, when he turned back around, the stranger was gone.

Upon entering the hotel, Kameryn was very surprised by how easy the two men were to find. He caught them in mid-conversation by the inn’s front desk, the clerk behind it fast asleep.

“Horrd was most definitely breaking orders,” the Hub announced loudly while the Beggar attempted to hide his face. “In fact, the Faction put out a call for his head.”

“And what are the chances of that happening?”

“Well, with an army of men at his disposal, you’d need another army just to stand a chance.”

“If there was a bounty call, you think I would’ve heard word of that by now...”

“Oh, it wasn’t a bounty call. A single announcement was made, orally, while a Nebarran ambassador was in earshot. I overheard it because, well, you know how I am.” The Hub’s

words seemed almost boastful, but there was a tinge of solitude in his voice and his posture. The tinge was a little too revealing to the Beggar.

“Maybe we should discuss this somewhere a little more private...”

“I think the Faction’s all too happy to let the general populace believe the Sprite was the one who kidnapped the Princess.”

“What?!” Kameryn exclaimed, making his presence finally known. “There were hundreds of spectators there! Everyone saw that Lido was saving her.”

The Beggar was silent, still wishing for a change of location. But the Hub just stared at Kameryn as if he were new to this world entirely.

“How do you know?”

The question was a little baffling to Kameryn. “Know? I was there. I helped them escape.”

“This is the Lind boy,” the Beggar explained.

“Whoa,” said the Hub, coughing a short laugh. “It’s weird. It’s like seeing a celebrity. Like a character from a book suddenly walked out and waved at you.”

Kameryn was silent, but felt there was no need to reply. Every interaction he had seen of this man led him to believe that it was not expected.

“You’ve been a Hub for too long, Guthrie,” the Beggar said, finally. “You’re beginning to forget what reality looks like. All you hear are stories.”

“I guess you’re right,” he replied, taking to a nearby chair. He became overcome by terseness.

“Any idea where Horrd’s army might be?”

“My guess would be Fex. At least, that’s where they took the Sprite they caught.”

“They caught him?” Kameryn asked redundantly, but only to the inside of his mouth.

“And the boy’s father?”

“Oh yeah,” Guthrie sighed, still shocked by his earlier revelation. “I know where your father is. I could take you to him now.”

All eyes were on Kameryn. He could feel this was his moment. “Where will you be?” his question directed toward the Beggar.

“Fex, I suppose. Find out what happened to Lido.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to see my father yet.”

“I’ve been ‘delaying’ his travel plans,” Guthrie quipped. “Wanted to make sure he didn’t leave town without you.”

“Let him go. And give him this.” From his belt, tucked away in the warm area between his shirt and his skin, he pulled the rolled up portrait of Frim and handed it over to Guthrie. “Can I follow you to Fex. I want to help you find Lido.”

“And what will you do when we find him?”

“There’s a question I need to ask him.”

Far to the south, a young boy and a young girl, dirty and ragged, came forth from the Grecka Woods, scratched, bruised, beaten, but alive, and saw in the distance, the glowing light from the giant stained glass window that adorned the front of Castle Nebarra.

The sun was rising now, adding to the brilliance of the colored light.

Merci breathed a sigh of relief. She was home.

The quiet streets of the city surrounding Castle Nebarra were awoken by the laughing and cheering of a princess and her savior as they made their way back to the castle.

The pair danced through the cobbled roads, ignoring the relieved stares of the townsfolk as they shouted “The Princess! She’s returned!” and various other indistinguishable cheers.

Pollen was more ecstatic than he had ever been in his life as he dashed after the Princess, keeping her framed in his vision, pretending to be looking past her when she spun around to smile at him, but quickly returning focus when she wasn't looking.

Nebarra Castle was situated on a hill overlooking the town, with the land around it separated by a short stone wall – by no means unwelcoming; it was simply a partition between the castle grounds and common land. A path ran down from the front gate of the castle to an opening in the wall, where a large, flowering archway billowed, beneath it a stone mosaic of the same pattern found on the castle's landmark stained glass window.

It was here, at that opening in the wall, the large flowering archway, where the Princess and the Bard were greeted by a team of soldiers, clad in their silver and gold armor.

“Princess Merciella,” said the Faction Captain, a mature man with a youthful gaunt figure, “please come with us.”