

III

Laundry

Lido had lost track of Pollen and the girl. At this point he was just randomly turning corners, hoping that wherever he was heading was away from the masked men and toward... safety? He quickly realized that he hadn't thought this plan out.

He stopped running and gazed around at his surroundings. An empty town. Everyone still at the Trade Fair. No bystanders, no soldiers, no masked men, no one. To his left, the peak of Mount Hian climbed in the distance. He looked up at the sun. Some birthday.

They're coming. Lido turned his head quickly. It seemed to be coming from the vines on the side of the building. *Keep running.*

He ran. *To the left. Now right.* Voices seemed to be coming from anything green around him. Vines on a building, weeds sticking through the pavement, flowers in pots on porches. *Your friend...* As the two walls of the book binder's shop came together, Lido found his nose buried almost completely in a young Montan's chest.

"Coren! Where is everyone?"

"I don't know... me and Kameryn got separated."

"Hold on, I think I hear someone coming..." The boys quieted and instinctively stooped down, balancing their limbs and absorbing as much sound as possible. A look of disappointment and fear overcame Lido as the sounds took shape into a large mass of thick-soled thugs. "We have to hide," Lido called out as the boys jumped behind a row of garbage cans. The swelling clamor of stomps surged past and dissipated before they showed their heads again. "Let's go."

With a wave, they bolted down the street, away from the storming mass, though the plants were fickle now, passing along only cryptic pieces of information. *They have moved... it is quiet...* at once they were silent completely, and Lido was beginning to feel secure. He

motioned to Coren that they would be resting, and he felt it was a good idea. They had reached the end of the road, and were now sitting on a cobbled cul-de-sac, across a short stone wall, a thin pine forest slept over fifty feet below, for you see, as a trade city, it was very important for Foothill to be level, which meant carving into the mountain on the north side, and lifting the city on the south.

“Do you think we lost them?” Coren asked through heavy breaths.

“I don’t know... I think so. I don’t think they were after us.”

“Maybe they found the others...”

“I hope not,” Lido replied, his chest feeling very heavy, almost pulling him off his feet.

But he would not be off them long.

THEY ARE HERE.

Lido jumped up. “Quick, we gotta move.”

“Huh?”

In an act of instinct, Lido grabbed his large companion and they ducked behind a bench just as their little alleyway was flooded by those clodding feet. Through the slats in the stone seat, a pair of boots could be seen marching towards them.

“I found them,” a voice called out, the man staring over a pair of huddled, shivering bodies. “Are you boys all right?”

Lido opened his eyes to find, instead of a throng of assailants, a noble company of Faction Guardsmen, clad in their glimmering armor.

The situation would have been more uplifting for Lido, had the others found better luck. When he asked if they had been found, the soldiers answered “no.” The assailants were nowhere to be seen either. With little other course of action to take, Lido and Coren accepted a ride home in the soldiers’ laundry wagon with little more than their prayers being sent with Pollen, Kameryn, and that mysterious girl.

Unbeknownst to them, all three of them could be found little over fifty feet away, as those three escaped in the forest below. They had eluded the masked men by hiding on the other side of the wall that lined the southern end of town, and, being in the position to do so, decided that the forest floor would be the best way to go. Beside that, Pollen had an escape plan.

In their younger days, certainly before the death of Pollen's father, Lido and Pollen would go on "journeys," exploring the mines just to see where they went. Often, they would enter one mine and find themselves in an entirely different mining colony. They challenged themselves to travel farther and farther from their home. They figured the whole mountain must be connected. It was basically hollow. Sometimes they worried that the entire mountain would collapse, but Pollen's father assured them that couldn't happen.

"There's a lot of mountain in there," he'd say. "It would take a million years to mine it out that much." The boys trusted him, but not too long after, a mine collapsed, and Pollen's father was left without a rebottle. Four years had passed since then, and neither of them had been in a mine since. But not much changes in a mine. And Pollen knew he could pop into one shaft and appear anywhere on the mountain he wanted in a matter of time.

The Dinta Mineshaft was one they were especially proud of discovering. An early attempt at what the founder referred to as "flash mining," the tiny town of Dinta quickly appeared, and then disappeared, as it was discovered that the particular methods of one Charles Dinta was not only extremely reckless, but also less profitable. The town was abandoned almost immediately.

But Dinta was far from being a ghost town. In order to recuperate as much of their losses as possible, the townsfolk scrapped and left with their houses as well. Dinta was nothing more than a row of stone foundations.

Pollen, Kameryn, and the girl crept through the forest and hiked along the mountain ridge to the entrance of the mine shaft. It was very late in the day when they finally arrived. “There it is.”

“Are we going through there?” asked the girl.

“We can take that tunnel anywhere we need to go on the mountain,” Pollen stated. “Any requests?”

“There are people waiting for me back at the fair.”

“Anywhere but there.”

“Just get us back to Twelve,” snapped Kameryn. “You can get us there, right?”

“Sure I can,” Pollen quipped.

They took a few steps into the mine, soon realizing they were about to be enshrouded in utter darkness.

“Anyone happen to bring a torch to the TRADE FAIR?” shouted Kameryn.

“Quiet down, your voice echoes in here,” snapped Pollen, quickly adding, “It’s hard enough to listen to the first time.” He deftly crept his way along the wall. “There’s bound to be some left over mining equipment around here...”

Skiff. His foot slid over a piece of wood. “Bingo.” He reached into the rotting crate and dug around. With a crack and a whoosh, they had light. “Come on.”

“Hold it.” Pollen turned to see Kameryn with his sword drawn. “I’m not going anywhere with this girl until she tells us why an army of mysterious men were after her.”

Pollen faced him, disgusted. “How could you question a girl that was almost kidnapped?”

“It doesn’t take fifty men to kidnap one girl,” Kameryn argued. “She could be just an innocent girl, or she could be a dangerous criminal. How do we even know we can trust her? We don’t even know her name.”

Pollen gave the girl an apologetic look, then turned back to Kameryn. “Look-“

“I’ll answer for myself, thank you.” The girl interrupted, slightly perturbed. “My name is Merci. I’m on a diplomatic mission from Nebarra. Now, can we please get out of here before that ‘army’ of men hear our bickering and come stab us?”

Kameryn conceded, and the three delved deeper into the darkness.

Merci’s abruptness had shamed Kameryn’s mouth shut, and for a good while after, they traveled through the cave in silence with the occasional warning from Pollen about a loose stone or a piece of wood dangerously dangling at eye level.

When they were a few hours in, and at least a mile from being heard outside the mine, they sat down in a circle and rested. With the torch mounted in the middle, Merci told her story.

She had been sent to speak with the Montan Council on behalf of the Royal Family of Nebarra. As the only two nations out of five who still owned a military, there had been mild grumblings of war between the two nations, and Nebarra wanted to assure its northern neighbor that they had no intent to take to arms.

“What do they have to fight for?” Pollen asked.

“The mountains,” was the succinct reply. “I’m sure you’re both aware that Monta’s mining industry has plummeted in the last few years. Their ore veins are running dry, and they’re looking to expand to the mountains in the south. The problem is that those mountains are sacred to a lot of Nebarrese people. The Montan Council wants to claim that the entire mountain range was their territory once, and may be willing to press further with this claim...”

“Gosh, politics always bored me,” Pollen quipped, lackadaisically.

“Well they’re kind of my life,” Merci snapped back.

“That’s not what I... I didn’t mean to...”

Kameryn started laughing abruptly. “Nice move, Kean.”

“Who do you think those men were?” Pollen blurted out in an effort to ease the tension.

“Who knows? Probably fortune hunters seeking to make a quick buck by abducting a diplomat.”

“No, no, no,” Kameryn interceded. “That many men would never go after one abduction. There’s no money in it, to split it all between them.”

Pollen gave him a torrid look. “Like you know how kidnappers think.”

“You’re absolutely right,” Merci cut in. Pollen nodded contently, before realizing that the syntax of her statement didn’t make sense as an accordance with him. She was agreeing with Kameryn. “Whoever they were, it wasn’t my ransom they were after. They were looking to start a war.”

“So, you’re saying they were militants,” Kameryn stated, very factually.

“That’s just a guess,” she replied defensively.

“A guess from you is good enough for me,” Kameryn added smugly.

“What does that mean?” she shot back.

Kameryn stood and looked at Pollen. “Am I the only one here who doesn’t believe a word she’s saying? Am I?”

“Hold on,” Pollen broke in, trying to defuse the tension. “Why would anyone want to start a war?”

“There’s plenty to gain from a war,” Merci explained. “And a war between Monta and Nebarra would be especially bountiful.”

The flute player slumped his shoulders. “They don’t teach us this stuff in school.”

“It’s too bad they don’t teach common sense either,” Kameryn muttered.

“It’s too bad they don’t teach manners,” Pollen retorted, mockingly.

“It’s too bad they don’t teach originality.”

“It’s too bad...”

“You guys!” Merci shouted before Pollen could think of a comeback, assuming he would have. The boys quieted down. “Look, it’s obvious that I could have had a pair of more agreeable rescuers. But as it stands, we are all in danger. So we’d better start working together, or we are all going to find ourselves in hot water.”

“I think they’ll let me off if I turn the two of you in,” Kameryn smirked. “Maybe even get a reward out of it.”

In a flash, Pollen was on top of him, throwing dirt in his face and pounding on the top of his skull. “Don’t you dare,” he screamed. “Don’t you dare Kameryn Lind.”

Kameryn shoved against his aggressor as Merci helped pull him off. “I was just kidding!” he yelled, scrambling to his feet. He brushed the dirt away from his face, and checked his hand for blood before pressing it back against his face. “Let’s work together. Geez.” He held out his other hand meekly towards Pollen.

Pollen took it and they shook.

With his other hand, Kameryn rubbed his sore face. “Shame they don’t teach sarcasm in school.”

The orange speck was growing larger in that black field, what had twinkled like a star was now dancing like a flame. Like a dozen flames. Like a million flames.

The horse on which he lied, the fibers of its tail spinning circles in unison with the bouncing leather straps of the staddle, was prancing rearily into the flames.

They were growing smaller now, as the dark strong hands placed him back on the ground, amidst the various rubble, not yet touched by the flames. The stones were placed around him, blacking out the light of the flames, and the moon that had newly appeared in the waning conflagration. Soon they were all gone. He was ready to sleep now, but something was wrong. He was already asleep.

Either a flash of light or inspiration awoke him, and in a second he was pulled from the growing fire, thrown onto a horse and watching that orange speck disappear into the darkness as the rhythmic clodding of the horse's hooves resonated through his body.

Lido wasn't sure when he had fallen asleep, but he was awake now, and it was dark. The horsesteps from his dream had carried over into his wake; he realized he was still in that Faction laundry cart, still on the move. But something was amiss.

"Coren, wake up," he snapped, gently prodding his giant friend.

"What's wrong?"

"We're not heading uphill anymore."

"Maybe we're almost home. Check outside."

The Sprite reached for the door handle, but he was not surprised when he found that it was locked. He crawled over the bags of laundry to a small gap in the wood by the driver's box. Peeking through, he was surprised to learn that they were traveling much faster than he thought they were. He was also surprised to find their driver was not human. Lido crawled back towards Coren's snoring side and prodded him again.

"I think we've been kidnapped."

"What?"

"The driver is some sort of lizard man."

"What?"

Something this incredulous had to be seen by oneself. Coren climbed over the same laundry bags and crammed his large frame into the same opening to peer at the gangly pair of green legs attached to the body holding the reins. Coren returned to his seat. "You're right."

They sat for a moment, contemplating their situation to the rhythm of the rocks passing under their wooden wheels. Suddenly, the realization that he may never eat again came to Coren. "We have to get out of here. What are we going to do? We need to get out!"

He crawled around their confined space, pressing against the walls, rapping on the door, trying to find some escape. He did this for some time before collapsing again on his pile of laundry. “Well, if they can hear us, they’re ignoring us... not much we can do until we get where they’re taking us.”

After a short rest on the mine floor, Pollen, Kameryn, and Merci took to their feet again, plodding onward into the dark tunnel. Merci kept herself between the two boys, in case something else broke out between them. The deeper they got, the colder it became, and it was beginning to become unbearable.

“Do you mind if I hold the torch for a little bit?” she asked, shivering.

“That’s fine,” Pollen replied, handing it over to her.

She took it in her hand, enjoying the bit of warmth for a second, before the controlled sense of sight overcame her. Using her newly acquired stick of light, she looked around the mineshaft and noticed something in a path to their side.

“What is that?” she asked as she approached it. The boys had no choice but to follow her.

The scene of her inquiry was a pile of rock, blocked off as well as possible by a heavy wooden fence. Tiny white handkerchiefs were pinned to it, draping down in a solemn manner.

“That’s the path to Twelve,” Pollen explained.

Kameryn approached it, checking the fence and the wall of rock for openings. “What the... it’s caved in! What do we do now?”

“We keep walking,” Pollen stated, knowingly.

“Did you know it was caved in?”

“I had an inkling. By the looks of it, I’d say it’s been that way for quite some time now... about four years.”

“Four...” In his mind, Kameryn traced the significance of that time back, trying to place it with events he was familiar with. “Wait, you were never planning on going back home, were you?”

Pollen started walking back through the tunnel, blindly. “It must’ve slipped my mind. I say we move further. I think there’s a tunnel to Fifteen a little down the way.”

“You’re not going home are you? That was the plan all along, wasn’t it? You tricked me!”

“I’m not about to leave Merci to those... militants. I’m taking her home. You can find your own way.”

“You’re a bastard, Kean. And a fool.”

Pollen ignored him and kept walking. In a fit, Kameryn pulled his blade and jumped in front of the two, holding the tip very near Pollen’s face. “You’ll get me back to Twelve or I’ll cut your head off right here,” he declared, tears of frustration welling in his eyes.

“You wouldn’t dare...”

“I would and I will!”

With a streak of fire, Merci’s torch came down on Kameryn’s hand, knocking the blade to the ground. Though it was barely touched by the fire, Kameryn clutched his hand as if it had been removed, dropping to his knees in agony.

“I think we should keep moving,” Merci said, stepping past the ailing boy, accompanied closely by Pollen.

Kameryn took to his feet, put away his sword and his anger, and broodingly followed.

After a few more hours of walking, the two boys and the princess heard a faint rumble echo through the mines. There was the faint sound of chatter, like a crowd of people shuffling their feet, or...

“Rain!” Merci ran toward the sound, the others picked up and followed. They came to a loosely boarded wooden archway. They tapped against the wood panels, but they didn’t give way. Pollen looked around with his torch and noticed a pickaxe lying against the wall.

“Stand back,” he said, motioning to the Princess, and he lifted back the pickaxe, ready to strike the wall.

Kameryn put a hand on the axe. “Wait. Maybe we should do this tomorrow.”

Pollen gave him a glare. “Oh don’t start this again...” He hoisted the pickaxe up again, and took aim at the wall.

“He’s right,” added Merci. “It won’t do us any good traveling in the rain, at night. We should ride out the storm in here, and head out tomorrow. If we had been followed into the mines, we’d know by now. If they’re out in the forest, they’re more likely to find us if they’ve seen that we broke our way out of this shaft. For the first time, I agree with Kameryn.”

Pollen lowered the pickaxe. “You’ve been agreeing with him all day,” Pollen muttered, hopefully to himself, but he was too tired to be sure.

The Princess went off to sleep behind a makeshift wall of crates, the two boys fell asleep in the open, Kameryn clutching his sword, Pollen nestled with the pickaxe. They drifted off to sleep with the sound of the rainfall.

Lido could hear the rain pattering against the top of the wagon. He couldn’t see it, but he could tell it was seeping in as well. As more rain fell, the laundry wagon was getting more and more out of control.

With a violent crash, the likes of which would probably have splattered them inside that wagon were they not padded with loads of soldiers’ undergarments, the wagon stopped. They could hear a commotion outside, but could barely make out the words, the sounds muffled by

their wooden cell. Blinded by the darkness, but desperate to understand the situation, Lido used his most obvious asset, his ears.

“Lido,” Coren said softly. “Are you okay?”

The Sprite quickly hushed his companion. “Hold on... let me try to figure out what’s going on.”

Outside, he could hear four or five pairs of feet scampering about, sloshing in the mud. He could hear the horses being freed from the reins and sent away, probably without riders. He could hear the bodies gathering, talking to each other. And he could hear them clomping away.

“I think they’re leaving,” Lido remarked.

“I think we’re sinking,” Coren answered.

Coren pulled his hand out of the thick mud, which was creeping in all around them. A burst of air released itself from under the wagon, sending more mud in to take its place. The boys became panicked.

“Check the door,” Lido called out, as both boys began scampering towards the sides of the wagon. It was difficult to tell how they had landed, but they flailed out in all directions to find out.

“Uh... Lido?” Something had caught on Coren’s pant leg, and as he bent down to release it, he realized what it was - a hinge. “I think we’re on the door.”

“We’re trapped.”

The thought was not particularly appealing to either boy, and they knew that if they did not get out, certain doom was sure to find them. “Help!” they called out, banging against the wooden walls of their soon-to-be crypt. “Let us out! Help!” They banged with all their might for what seemed like a very long time. They weren’t sure if they were calling out to their captors, or anyone who would be close enough to hear them, but they banged and screamed with the fear of a creature about to be swallowed whole by a dark, muddy predator.

The mud was creeping up on them now, overtaking their feet, then their legs, it was now close enough for them to dip their elbows in if they chose not to keep them up. It was then that the clanging started, louder than their own, from outside. It started small, singular, but quickly grew, as a choir of hammering sang out. In a few minutes and another foot of mud, the wooden boards were stripped apart and the boys were pulled from their muddy beds by many pairs of green hands.