

Adventures En Route

I

Trama and Action left for Frog City the next morning. Dunton came with them.

“Well its not like you’re going to manage on your own,” Dunton scoffed. “You don’t know the lay of the land or the politics involved. Frog City is a week’s hike away. On your way there, you’ll probably want to stop by Turtle’s swamp. You’re both hopelessly uninformed.”

“Well you didn’t informed us. You just jabbered about bassoons,” said Action. Dunton ignored him.

A steep path wound its way up and out of Devil’s Canyon. The group hiked this trail, watching the canyon grow deeper below them. Beneath their feet was loose gravel. On either side, the trail fell steeply away. Any misstep would have resulted in a fall to the death. It was a lucky thing that none of them were scared of heights. In fact, Trama was soon bored enough to risk a long-winded conversation with Dunton.

“Hey Dunton. Where did all the villagers go?” asked Trama.

“The Pawtwanese? They thought the train was bad luck, so they left.” said Dunton.

“Bad luck?” said Action. “They live in a place called Devil’s Canyon.”

Dunton said, “oh, they don’t live there. The Pawtwanese are a nomadic people, much like myself. I’ve got quite a lot in common with them, and some excellent stories concerning them. For example: can you imagine how a nomadic fishing village might have stumbled upon a victorian arm-chair?”

Action tried to stop Dunton, but it was too late. Dunton had started talking, and didn’t stop until long after they had made their way out of the canyon.

The sight which met them at the canyon’s brim didn’t stop Dunton from talking, but it certainly caught the other two traveler’s attention. Devil’s Canyon was contained within a desert bordered by steep mountains. Windswept sand and jagged rock filled the landscape which lay before them. It was a desolate and lifeless place. Dunton cheerfully led the way. Trama asked him about the desert that surrounded them. Dunton gave a characteristically indirect answer.

“Most lifeforms rely on water. Now I only mention that fact since all the water in this world flows towards Frog City. At the edge of Frog City is a great ocean. And all the forests and swamps and green things of this world are in one of two places: either along the banks of rivers, or along the border of Frog City.”

The travelers were not near a river or Frog City. They stopped for the night, having seen very few green things during their day’s journey. Dunton had brought, of all things, firewood in his backpack. They sat around a fire, eating a curious food which Dunton referred to as ‘goblin-spiced jerky.’ The fire was pleasantly warm. The jerky was unpleasantly stale.

Dunton said, “We need to be on the lookout for goblins. You two look like you could use some sleep. I’ll take first watch.”

“Oh, I’m not tired, I’d be happy to take first watch,” Action said. Action spoke with a syrupy, sneaky voice. Dunton moved to the opposite side of the fire and covered himself with a blanket.

Action spent a few minutes darting his eyes between Trama and Dunton. Dunton began to snore, and Action sidled up to Trama.

Action indicated towards Dunton and whispered, “what are we going to do when its his turn to stand watch?”

Trama said, “let him guard us from goblins, I suppose.”

“Yes, I know,” whispered Action, as if Trama was missing the obvious. “But who is going to guard us from him?”

“From Dunton?” said Trama, raising an eyebrow. “You’re the one who shot at me with a crossbow yesterday.”

Action had to admit, Trama made a valid point. Trama had also given Action an idea. Action kept watch all that night. While he kept watch, he whittled and worked with firewood. He unraveled a strap from Dunton’s backpack and did clever things with the thread and metal bits. By the time Trama and Dunton had woken, Action had made himself a crossbow and some arrows.

After a breakfast of goblin-spiced jerky, Dunton complained about his backpack’s missing strap. Two minutes later, Dunton had segued from the missing strap to a story concerning artful upholstery. They hiked through the desert. The day passed much the same as the last had. As the sun set, they ran into a goblin.

They could see the goblin long before it grew near. There was nowhere to hide. Dunton recommended against running. Waves of sand whirled in the wind, obscuring their view of the approaching nemesis. Action raised his crossbow.

“Your crossbow is useless against this type of goblin,” said Dunton. He continued to speak as the goblin’s form emerged out of the sand.

“I know this goblin. This isn’t the type of goblin that gambles and drinks. This is an insidious poet goblin. Be on guard: the poetry writing type barely look like goblins at all. They’ll bite into you with the words that make you hurt most. I don’t even think they’re conscious of what they’re doing. To the insidious poet goblin, words are rusty bayonets. Stabbing out at everything they touch comes as naturally as breathing.”

The goblin had approached them. It sat on a donkey, a dozen feet away. The donkey’s hind legs had been replaced with wheels. The goblin wore a vest. Beneath the vest was a curious bulge. The goblin cocked his head and stared at them with a sickly sweet grin.

“He-lllo there Dunton. I see you have some friends with you. They wouldn’t happen to be the humans who recently killed one of my brethren, would they?”

“No, they’re not,” said Dunton. “I was just recently at a futon convention in Tupaloo. Now, I only mention that convention because I commissioned a piece of furniture there. These two are craftsmen who are accompanying me back to Frog City-”

The goblin interrupted him. As the goblin spoke, his vest fell aside.



The roll and tracker board of a player piano were where the goblin's chest should have been. One of the goblin's hands twisted a crank. The goblin's voice took on a corrupt twang. The tracker board began to move. Filthy, mind-melting goblin poetry commenced.

"There's no barrier between your thoughts and your mouth, Dunton. You're lying. Goblins say the lies and half truths that get us closer to what we want. I don't know why you are lying. Furthermore, I doubt you have any idea what you want."

Now the goblin was wound up. Goblin poetry spewed forth at a frantic pace.

"You two! You goblin killers! Vessel derailers! You are no more furniture makers than Dunton is philosopher. If you get to know Dunton better, you'll realize that there isn't much to him. Occasionally he'll accidentally say something interesting but, overall, the man is just a rambling train of thought. A rambling train of thought with a moustache on top! Not worth your time in the slightest."

Dunton raised his voice, crying out over the goblin poetry, "You're evil! All your poetry does is spread pain."

"Maybe so," sneered the goblin. "But I know who I am. Do you know who you are, Dr. Hilary?"

"No, I don't know. But I've been around your type long enough to know that I'm part goblin," said Dunton bravely. "I know that when I'm hurt, I sometimes spread that hurt. I'm enough goblin to know exactly why I despise you."

"You're not at all like a goblin, Dr. Hilary. You're a liar, and you believe your own lies."

Seething, Dunton said, "I'm not a liar... I just have an exceptional imagination."

Dunton head-butted the goblin. The goblin fell off his donkey.

With the wind knocked out of him, the goblin said, "You know I'd kill you if certain frogs weren't obsessed with your postcards. No matter. You're already dead inside."

Then the shaft of an arrow appeared in the goblin's chest. Action had shot the goblin.

"WHAT DID YOU DO THAT FOR?" yelled Dr. Hilary.

"He was obviously going to be a problem," said Action.

"Do you always resolve problems by shooting them with arrows?"

said Trama.

“Whenever possible,” replied Action.

Dunton poked the goblin. The goblin quietly moaned.

“He’ll die if we don’t get him to a doctor immediately,” said Dunton, now slightly calmer.

“But aren’t you a doctor?” asked Trama.

Dr. Hilary Dunton nodded in agreement, “luckily, I am.” Dunton pulled some bandages and ointments from his backpack. Dunton gestured towards the goblin with a syringe.

“By the way,” said Dunton, “this is my boss.”

The goblin looked feebly upwards at Trama and Action.

“Pleased to meet you,” croaked the goblin. Then the goblin passed out.

II

They sat around a campfire. A heavily medicated goblin and his donkey lay some ways off. Dunton had removed the goblin’s player piano roll.

Dunton held the roll in front of him as he spoke, “Don’t worry about my boss. Without this roll, he can’t spew goblin poetry. He’s actually often quite agreeable, as goblins go.”

“Agreeable?” said Action. “Do you usually headbutt people you agree with?”

“Sometimes,” agreed Dunton. “Anyways, we wouldn’t have made it to Turtle’s swamp tonight. This was a good place to stop. Unless, of course, we run into a goblin patrol. I believe my relations with the goblins may be a little strained right now.”

“Ugh,” said Action, “that poet goblin is going to attract all kinds of trouble, I just know it.”

Trama said, “I have a hard time believing you’d go out of your way to avoid trouble.”

Action said, “No. If there’s trouble brewing, I don’t want any part of it.”

Trama quipped, “I thought you loved brewing.”

Action said, “I don’t. I don’t like puns, I don’t like this campsite, and I don’t even like brewing beer.”

Action paused. He looked surprised at his own words. He continued as if talking to himself, “My Uncle and my father did it. It was a way of mak-

ing money. I don't have bills to pay at Yellow Lake. I'm not sure why I still brew. I think most people's lives take a few unexpected turns, and suddenly they're stuck with some profession."

"I'd say your train of thought just took an unexpected turn," interjected Dunton. Action gave Dunton a glare.

"Dunton, I don't think you have any right to criticize unexpected trains of thought," said Trama. Dunton's mustache drooped bashfully.

Action continued, "Me and Dee, we didn't really know that many adults growing up. Most of the ones we did know seemed unhappy. Do most adults enjoy the way they spend their time? How many sort of fall into their lives and stick there?"

"Don't look at me. I've never stuck anywhere in my life," said Dunton, "But, while we're on the subject of personal revelations-"

He looked back and forth between his travelling companions for dramatic effect, "I used to not have a moustache." Trama and Action were nonplussed.

"Yess... I was one of those people," Dunton said. Again, he looked back and forth between his moustache-less travelling companions. This time the look carried a hint of moustachioed condescension.

Dunton cleared his throat. "Ahmm. So, of course I was sad. I would wake up and feel sad, and channel that sadness into playing violin. I used to skip lunch just to hear the sound that my sadness made through a violin. Hearing my sadness made me very happy. Unfortunately, my hands began to hurt when I played. I had to stop playing, and I wasn't sure what to do with my sadness. Without the violin, there was no point to being sad. And so that's why I grew this moustache."

Once again, Trama and Action shared a 'this guy is crazy' glance.

"What?" said Dunton. "It's well known that a man with a well groomed moustache is seldom sad. I thought it was common knowledge."

It wasn't common knowledge. Trama scratched at the ground with his foot.

Dunton sighed. "I see I'm going to have to spell this out for you. My sadness no longer made me happy, soooo... I grew a moustache," said Dunton, waving a piece of firewood at the ground as if he were drawing out an arithmetic problem.

At this point, Action was unsure whether or not Dunton was making fun of him. Dunton was unsure whether or not he had made himself

clear. He was scribbling furiously at the air and muttering under his breath. The only word Trama made out was “mfhaehf ... moustache... jfajweoif.”

“Well that’s enough personal revelation for me tonight,” said Trama, laying down on the ground and shutting his eyes.

Action followed suit. One moment Action was filled with distrust and a vague sense of anger. The next moment, he was fast asleep.

III

The following morning when Trama and Action woke, the goblin had made them pancakes.

“Sorry I got so wound up yesterday,” said the goblin. “When something grinds my gears I can’t help myself.”

Trama and Action looked at the agreeable goblin in disbelief. The goblin wore a kitchen apron. An arrow’s shaft protruded out of the middle of the apron. Dunton had treated the wound but hadn’t removed the arrow.

Whatever Dunton’s strange relationship with his boss was, Trama and Action didn’t spend too much time considering it. They had eaten goblin-spiced jerky for two days straight. They dug into the pancakes with ravenous appetites.

Soon the travelers continued on their way. With no discussion of matter, the goblin and his donkey had joined their party. For two more days they travelled through the desert. They passed through an endless melange of coarse, uninhabited earth. Rocky crags and windswept dunes seemed to blend together.



On the third day, the formations of rock took on subtly softer shapes. On the fourth day, they gratefully stumbled through a dramatically greener landscape. They found a burbling stream and gorged their thirsts. They traveled onwards over hills. For a time, their path coincided with a winding trail. The trail's graceful contours followed another stream. At the edge of a forest, the stream joined a wide river. They traveled through the forest. The once wide river narrowed to a deep and raging channel. The waters grew so loud that they washed away the other forest sounds. Likewise, their journey had washed over them and poured past with a purposeful fervor.

There had been no discussion of Dunton's boss joining their group. But during those days of travel there were plenty of other discussions. When the goblin spoke, he was mostly agreeable and just a little insidious. One of the group's discussions concerned Turtle.

"So, why exactly do we need to visit Turtle?" Action questioned.

"Well, there are some things that I haven't explained," said Dunton, as if this was a revelation. Dunton's companions weren't sure if he had ever explained anything.

"Turtle is a sort of wise man. I think of Turtle as a kindred soul," said Dunton. His explanation of Turtle was uncharacteristically straightforward.

"Yes, I can see why Dunton would hold that opinion," said the goblin.

"Why?" asked Trama.

The goblin said, "There are three types of people. Introverted, extroverted, and self-absorbed. The introverts keep to themselves, the extroverts share themselves, and the self-absorbed put themselves on a pedestal. Turtle is self-absorbed."

"He probably absorbed himself a long time ago. That's why he's so trustworthy," chimed in Dunton.

"You're on to something, Dr. Hila-ry," said the goblin sarcastically.

Dunton didn't catch the sarcasm and continued, "He wants others to see that he is worthwhile. I've never received bad advice from turtle. He says impressive things."

The goblin eyed Dunton with disgust. The goblin said, "If you listen closely, you can hear just how impressed he is with his own words."

The group traveled onwards. The path traveled downwards. Trees grew smaller, and they passed pools of standing water. As they approached Turtle's swamp, a curious conversation took place between Dunton and his

boss.

“Have you reconsidered my proposal, Dunton?” said the goblin.

“No. Absolutely not. It violates everything I stand for.”

“What if I brought these two into it?” said the goblin, tilting his head towards Action and Trama. “Maybe the frogs could sweeten the deal. There’s some goblins who are pretty mad about their dead friend. Maybe the frogs could convince those goblins to leave these two alone.”

“Is that why you’re here? Is this just a ploy? Well no! I’m not interested.”

“Dunton, Dunton, Dunton. Always fabricating stories and plots where there are none. I just ran into your silly little troupe and decided to keep you company. But now-,” the goblin looked at Action and said, “if you’re not going to kill me, I’ll be on my way.”

With a flash of movement, the goblin reached into Dunton’s backpack and grabbed the piano roll. Action’s hands moved towards his cross-bow, but Dunton waved him off. The goblin hopped onto his donkey and galloped down the path.

About an hour later, they heard Turtle. The trail had descended into a bank of fog. Strains of ukulele made their way through the milky white air. The group picked their way along the muddy path. On either side of them, dirt melted into swamp. Nearby, waterlilies floated on a layer of scum. Tadpoles darted amongst the lilies. Crawfish darted amongst pebbles wherever the water ran clear and fast.

Crawfish lay between the path and an island. Turtle lounged on the island, strumming his Uke. Turtle sang:

*Well I’m the ruler of the swamp
the swamp ruler indeed
The storks catch all the fish for me
and on the fish I feed
I’m quick to talk but slow to walk
or move in any way
I leave the storks to get things done
And laze away the day
No, please don’t think the less of me
I wouldn’t want you to
You see, my thoughts are worth alot*

*My value's not in things I do
My value's in the things I say-
take what I said the other day
A stork caught a big fish
and choked upon the dish
I told the stork he should have knew
Don't bite off more than you can chew*

Turtle finished his song. Dunton clapped. Turtle interrupted the clapping.

"I hope Dunton hasn't been feeding you two goblin-spiced jerky. It's loaded with preservatives. Personally, I adhere to a strict diet of fish and pina coladas."

The Turtle set down his Ukulele and sipped on a pina colada. Trauma had been certain that a goblin-player-piano was the strangest thing he would ever see. Now he wasn't so sure.

"But you're not here for nutritional advice. No, no one pays any attention to what they put in their bodies these days. So many packaged foods! Ah, what I would do for the bygone years when convenience wasn't the greatest of virtues."

Turtle sipped, then continued, "You're here because you'd like a convenient answer. On that account I can deliver. Here is your answer: to return to Yellow Lake, fill your mind with that place's sights and sounds. Then walk through one of the clearly demarcated magical doorways in Frog City. Quick as a flash, you'll reappear near a redwood tree in your homeland."

Action said, "We don't want to return home. We want to save Dee."

"That is a markedly more inconvenient problem," said Turtle. Turtle loved talking about inconvenient problems.

He continued, "And if you insist on pursuing that goal, I will only give you an inkling of what lies ahead. Yes, there is a way to save a soul which is being repurposed. But it is a tricky thing to do. You see, once a soul has been marked for repurposing, a change comes over it. Some souls become trains. Others become buses, planes, or spaceships. Over time, the soul gives way to that aspect which longs to travel through the space-time continuum. You cannot touch this eternal part of the soul. So, you see, even if you do save Dee, she will not remember having left Yellow Lake."

"O.K.," said Action. "I have no idea what you just said, and I don't

really care. Could you just tell us how to save Dee?"

"I do not know how to save Dee," said Turtle.

Trama said, "well then why-"

"But I know of someone who does," interrupted Turtle. "There is a great man who lives in the Perch. Yes, unbelievably, there is a man whose wisdom is greater than my own. He is the man who made up all the rules to this world. He is the only one who can tell you how to save Dee."

"Sounds good. We'll stop by this Perch place and pick up Dee on our way home," said Action.

"No! Silly, high-strung man. You cannot not undertake a journey to the Perch so lightly."

Trama almost laughed. He couldn't think of any insult that would peeve Action more than being called silly.

Turtle continued, "colossal waterfalls surround Frog City. Those waterfalls are dwarfed by one other. High above Frog City lies a great mountain. One side of the mountain is sheer. The greatest of waterfalls flows from a ledge. This ledge is the Perch. You cannot get there without climbing a treacherous cliff. Why, getting to the Perch is nearly impossible without sprouting wings and flying. Only one man I know has made it there alive. That man is standing right next to you."

Trama and Action looked around. The only man standing next to them was-

"Dunton? You've been to the Perch?" said Action incredulously.

Dunton nodded sadly. "I don't really remember it though. All I remember is walking through a doorway up there, and finding myself in a world filled with massive chess pieces. I wandered that world for quite some time, until I was found by the poet goblin."

Turtle said, "So be forewarned: even if you make it to the Perch, you may not be able to save Dee. Many years ago, Dunton tried to save his friend. He tried to heed the great man's instructions, and look what happened to him."

"Wait, what happened to me?" said Dunton. The others ignored him.

"So who exactly is this great man in the Perch?" said Action.

"I'm not sure," said Turtle. "But at any rate I suspect he's flying by the seat of his pants. The rules of this world aren't particularly cohesive."

"Doesn't that bother you?" said Trama.

"No, it doesn't bother me much. I actually find it fitting."

Turtle checked out his reflection in the water as he continued, “Most things operate by blind intuition. We swim onwards, following our gut. Eventually everything gets eaten or decomposes, but the act of swimming is often nice. I hope that your journey from Yellow Lake was interesting. Struggle, swim onwards, and enjoy the waters as best you can. I’ve lived through enough black tendrils to know that there’s usually light somewhere. And even the man up in the Perch must be searching for something...” Turtle trailed off.

Turtle looked into the distance. Then Turtle looked back towards his audience, to make sure that they had observed his forlorn glance. Trama suspected that Turtle had rehearsed his monologue.

Triumphantly, Turtle finished, “Forgive me, the swamp air is thick and I ramble. You should leave this foggy place, or soon my rambling will be as discombobulated as Dr. Hilary.”

Through the fog, Trama saw Dunton’s moustache twitch at the insult. Turtle had given them some useful information, but he was an unpleasant, narcissistic individual.

They hiked through the swamp. The fog dissipated. Our three adventurers stood at the top of a waterfall. They stood at the top of one of many waterfalls. Miles of waterfalls formed a semicircle around a great basin. Lighted skyscrapers shone through a mist in the basin’s center. In the distance was an ocean. Before them stood Frog City.

It had been a long day and, as they made camp, Frog City was the last thing on their minds.

“And to think, I thought highly of Turtle. Discombobulated? Well I never!” said Dunton as he attempted to light the wrong end of a match.

The other adventurers were preoccupied with more important matters. Action told Trama his plan.

He said, “We’ll go to Frog City. You’re going to build me a glider. Then I’ll fly to the Perch.”

“I suppose I could try to build a glider. But I’d have to fly it. You would have no idea how to take off, spot updrafts, or land-”

“Do you think that I could live with myself, letting a stranger save my sister while I do nothing?” said Action.

“I’m not a stranger, Action. I’m your friend,” said Trama.

For once, Action didn’t have a biting retort. He said, “Well, fine. We’ll make two gliders and both go.”

The sky grew dark but they didn't sleep. They sat, as they had for some nights before, around the embers of a fire. In the dim firelight, Dunton was attempting to read a book.

"What are you reading?" asked Trama.

"Great Expectations," said Dunton, squinting at a page. A gust of wind scattered the fire's embers. The campsite grew dark. Dunton sighed, put his book down, and continued, "by Charles Dickens. There's lots of interesting places and events in it, but I've been rereading the scenes where not much happens. Those parts are my favorite."

"Why's that?"

"Well... I think everything that happens could be a story. How good the story is mainly depends on the author's ability, not the plot. When a good author tells a story about nothing much, there's no events to constrain them. You get to read exactly the story that the author felt like telling."

"That's the most articulate thing I've ever heard you say, Dunton," said Trama.

"Yes," said Dunton, staring into the fire's remains, "I suppose it was."

The events of the previous week swirled around them. Unlike Dunton, Trama couldn't complete a meaningful strain of thought. He was scared. He was scared of what Action might do, and he was scared of what he himself might do. Returning without trying to save Dee didn't seem like much of an option. That wasn't because Trama was brave, or even because he cared about Dee. They had come to a peculiar place, and had seen things that seemed very distant from reality. Their journey needed resolution. If he gave up and simply returned to Yellow Lake, the whole experience would twist into a knot so convoluted that he would never untangle it.

After a few minutes Dunton said, "Also, the book's ending has the type of sadness I like. The violin playing type of sadness."

IV

Cities are places where people's stories clump next to one another. Some stories tend to interact, and other stories mostly keep to themselves. Some stories are often about hunger, and other stories sleep on feather pillows. Stories sit next to each other on public transportation. Stories teach and learn in schools. Stories lightly touch, disturbing only the surface of their respective plots. These plots are incomprehensibly complex. However,

although they are very complicated, they tend to plod along a certain path.

Occasionally a simple interaction takes root. Two stories may barely touch, but in just the right way. With only a few perfectly calibrated prods, a story might suddenly veer off a cliff or up a mountain. Those are the moments when a story's complexity explodes.