

City Happenings

Frog City had very little to do with frogs. The part of the city where Dunton booked them a hotel room had more to do with gambling than anything else. Their hotel room was in the Warfmen. The Warfmen stood next to a new casino named WaterFall 45'. WaterFall 45's roof was dominated by a steeply angled 5-story artificial waterfall. The waterfall fell at an angle of 46 degrees. This was due to an error in the casino's construction. In comparison, the Warfmen was rather dingy. It was much smaller than WaterFall 45'. The Warfmen's gimmick was its exceptional exercise facilities, which were invisible from the exterior.

It was evening. The last leg of their journey had been deceptively longer than it had appeared from atop the waterfall. Action and Trama made their way up the Warfman's dilapidated marble stairway. They were exhausted. They were panting by the time they had reached the twelfth floor. Then they made their way down a wide, tall, and yet strangely claustrophobic hallway. It was not a straight hallway. It was a twisting, turning, winding hallway. Every dozen meters or so was a looming portrait of an elegantly dressed goblin or nematode. Tucked in each corner of the hallway was an exercise machine.

"Are you sure this is the right floor?" questioned Trama as they made

their way past a row of metal tubes. The tubes were labeled 'barometric pressure chambers: not for use by pregnant women or poetic goblins.'

"Yes, yes of course," said Dunton. "I knew you'd want lots of room to plan out your gliders, so I booked the master suite. Incidentally, it's near all the best exercise and spa equipment."

As the group made their way to the master suite, they paraded past the 'best exercise and spa equipment'. They passed saunas, tanning beds, a barred metal door marked 'centrifuge,' and one lonely treadmill. They passed a few obese, talkative goblins who were wearing only towels. Their suite was at the end of the hallway next to an ice bath.

In the center of their suite was a roulette table. The Warfmen's manager had thought that allowing patrons to gamble in their rooms would increase revenue. The Warfmen's manager was not a smart man.

They gathered around the roulette table. Dunton grabbed a pad of paper and pen off the table. Both were marked with the Warfmen's logo.

"Let's list out all the materials you'll need," said Dunton, "and, by the way, how long will it take you to build two gliders?"

Trama realized that he hadn't thought their plan through very well.

"The last one took me a year to build."

"A year," deadpanned Action.

"You don't have a year to save Dee," said Dunton unhelpfully.

Action swiped at the roulette table in frustration. The roulette wheel spun round and round. It slowed and stopped. A marble lay next to the number 0. The number 0 pointed towards Dunton.

"Hey Dunton, how did you get up to the Perch?" asked Trama.

Dunton felt his breast pocket for his pipe. His eyes fell upon a *No Smoking* sign. Dunton's hand fell limply to his side. He cleared his throat.

"Ahmm."

A long winded story was forthcoming. Action and Trama prepared themselves.

"Do you remember what I've told you about Darby? Darby was my best friend. Darby was also an avid outdoorsmen. When I was only seven or eight, Darby took me on a long hike. It was good fun. The trail was wide and strewn with boulders. I leapt from one boulder to the next. For miles, my feet didn't touch dirt. I just jumped from boulder to boulder, skimming over the earth. Hiking is one of the greatest pleasures I have known. If you'll allow me to wax philosophical, I think that hiking is wandering in its purest form:

interesting scenery, a path forward, and curiosity for what will come next. We were hiking a mountain. As we neared the top, the trees grew smaller. A rocky top lay before us. The panorama of a great range of mountains lay behind. I was young and bold. The hike's rock hopping beginnings had tired me. But the top of the mountain, our destination, seemed in sight. Over and over, I told Darby 'I think I can make it.' We hiked to that rocky top. Another higher peak came into view. I realized that the true top of the mountain was higher still. We had only arrived at a false peak. I told Darby, 'I don't think I can make it.'"

Dunton squinted. He reached for a match, until his eyes rediscovered the *No Smoking* sign. He continued, "now I only mention that hike because it relates to the most comfortable sofa I've ever known. Two intrepid park rangers sat at that false peak. They sat upon a sofa. Perhaps as a joke, or perhaps just to see if such a thing could be done, they had carried a sofa up the mountain. Darby and I rested at the false peak. The rangers allowed us to sit on their sofa. It was extremely comfortable. To this day, I have yet to find a sofa so absolutely buoyant. I sunk into the cushions, and they pushed back in just the right way. It was lovely. After eating some granola bars and resting, Darby looked at me. He questioned me. He said, 'not good enough?' and I nodded. We hiked on. All the way to the mountain's peak, I felt the buoyant cushions of that sofa propelling me onwards. Yes, I practically floated to the top of the mountain. Now I only mention that sofa because it relates to an interaction I had with some frogs."

Dunton's moustache and voice quivered as he continued his story. His eyes watered. "As I told you both earlier, my friend Darby was whisked away by goblins. We both ended up aboard a double-decker-bus-goblin-vessel. The half of the train from Yellow Lake which we were aboard derailed. However, when a goblin vessel is not derailed, it travels this world's waterways to a bay near Frog City. When I tried to save Darby, I travelled all the way to that bay. Then some goblins took Darby and threw him into a raging whirlpool. The goblins had me tied up. It was a difficult thing to watch. Afterwards, the goblins unceremoniously deposited me on a curb here in Frog City."

Dunton sighed wistfully, "Some frogs picked me up. When I told the frogs that I wanted to save Darby, they told me about the Perch. Then the frogs made me a dangerous, foolish offer. There are many clearly demarcated magical doorways in Frog City. However, there are only two doors

marked *particularly magical doorway*. One is in the storeroom of a bakery here in Frog City. The other is in the Perch. The frogs led me to a *particularly magical doorway*. They told me that, if I imagined it just right, I could end up in the Perch just by walking through that doorway. This was true. But the frogs knew that, in all likelihood, my imagination would fail me. They thought I would die. They didn't know that I had an exceptional imagination. I walked through the *particularly magical doorway*. The next thing I knew, I was floating upwards to the Perch aboard my favorite sofa."

"So what you're saying is that we need to walk through this *particularly magical doorway*?" asked Trama.

Dunton said, "No, it's not that simple. Firstly, you both clearly lack exceptional imaginations. Secondly, irregaurdless, we'd need to make a deal with the frogs to get into their bakery's storeroom."

They ordered room service, discussed their options, and slept on feather pillows. The next morning Dunton took an ice bath. Afterwards, the three companions once again gathered around the roulette table.

Dunton voiced his thoughts out loud. "hmmm, how would I imagine you two up to the Perch?"

Dunton turned towards Trama and said, "when you told me about Yellow Lake, you recited a pretty lengthy narrative about building a glider. Why, I suspect it would have filled fourteen pages or so. It was also much more interesting than that first part about the house on stilts. Anyways, if I were to imagine a glider for you, Trama, I think I have a pretty good idea what it would look like."

Now Dunton turned towards Action. "But if I were to imagine a glider for you, I'm not exactly sure how it would look."

Action said, "It would probably look similar to Trama's. I guess... I guess if I made a glider there would be a crossbow built into it. There'd be some sort of crossbow grappling hook thing that I could use to abandon the glider if it was going to crash."

"Excellent imagination!" exclaimed Dunton.

Trama disagreed. "That must be the worst idea I've ever heard. You'd only get one shot, and if you messed up you'd kill yourself."

"I've got an excellent shot," replied Action.

"Have you ever shot a crossbow from a glider moving at high speeds?"

"No, but it can't be harder than shooting off of a caravel on the high seas."

Trama shook his head. "Why don't you just imagine a parachute instead?"

"I've got excellent shot," reiterated Action. "And I'd only use it if I had to."

"Precisely," said Dunton. "Besides Trama, you'd never get to the Perch via something as unimaginative as a parachute. The very idea is absurd. But this is all hypothetical. You two shouldn't get your hopes up. The frogs have a vested interest in repurposing souls, and the *particularly magical doorway* is heavily guarded. We'll just head over to the bakery, try to make a deal, and see what happens."

Almost unconsciously, Action's hand reached down towards his crossbow.

"Don't bring the crossbow," warned Dunton. Then Dunton, Trama, and Action left the Warfmen. They headed to the frog bakery with the intention of making a deal or, at the very least, getting some breakfast.

Thoughts have a way of escaping at their own pace, and filling the space available to them. The streets of Frog City were bustling. But, as they walked towards the bakery, Frog City passed by like a rushed thought. There were a million things to look at. They had no interest in those things. The city's sights and sounds blurred together like a time lapse photo of traffic. Soon they stood in front of a posh bakery with a sheet glass storefront.

Only two things were notable about Trama's journey from the Warfmen to the bakery. The first was a moment of *deja vu* he had while looking at a food vendor. The second was a foreboding sense that they were being followed.

Before they had time to properly examine the bakery, a frog popped out of its doorway and ushered them over.

"Come on in, come on in! We've been expecting you."

This was a strange thing for the frog to have said. Dunton and Trama moved towards the bakery. The frog's words were too much for Action's distrustful instincts.

Trama looked back at his friend. Action shook his head. "I'll stand guard," said Action.

Trama and Dunton made themselves comfortable at a corner table behind the sheet glass. Action stood outside with rigid posture, scanning the block for suspicious activity. Most of the activity around the bakery involved either scones or biscuits. Trama looked behind the counter of the

bakery.

"Is that who I think it is?" said Trama.

"Yes indeed," replied Dunton. "My boss only runs a postcard publishing firm part-time. He also keeps himself occupied as a pastry chef (with the occasional odd job as an insidious poet goblin)."

The insidious poet goblin was ringing up a dozen bagels for an elderly woman. He saw Dunton and Trama. The goblin wiped some flour off his apron, grab a ledger book, balance two lattes on a tray, and walk over.

The frog and poet goblin sat down across from Trama and Dunton.

"Let's get right down to business," said the frog.

"We've been authorized to proffer you a deal, and some lattes," said the poet goblin.

"Wait a second. How do you have any idea what we want?" said Trama.

The frog scoffed, "I think it's pretty obvious. Everyone likes lattes. And by now half the city must know that you're trying to get up to the Perch. We've got the only means of getting there."

The poet goblin handed them lattes. "Now just give me a second to find the details of our offer..." said the goblin.

The goblin lowered a pair of glasses to the end of his nose. He flipped through pages, running his long fingers across each. The frog killed time.

"So," said the frog to Trama, "this whole trip must be pretty exciting for you, eh?"

Trama said nothing.

The frog hated silence. He did his best to fill it. He said, "for instance, I bet you'd never heard of magical doorways until recently. Remarkably, there are more than a dozen magical doorways here in Frog City. In addition to our *particularly magical doorway*, there's another merely magical doorway right next to this bakery. But that merely magical doorway is boarded up."

Trama remained silent. After an awkward pause, the frog continued, "of course, you probably want to know why that doorway is boarded up." Trama didn't especially care.

The frog continued, "well, I bet you know that the magical doors transport you to wherever you imagine. Tourists would accidentally walk through the one near here while thinking about bread. Many found themselves stuck in a world filled with sentient pastries."

Trama chuckled at the thought. The frog replied, "it's no laughing matter. My niece did just that. She had to wait six years in a village of treacle tarts before a goblin vessel brought her back home. She and many other people wouldn't take kindly to someone being so gluten intolerant."

The goblin's finger stopped. "Ahh... here is your offer. Dunton, I believe that you're already familiar with the basics of it."

Dunton choked on his latte. "That offer? That's the offer that you're making? I thought I made it clear. It's simply against everything I stand for."

"What offer?" said Trama.

"In exchange for usage of our *particularly magical doorway*, we request that Dr. Hilary Dunton travel to the following address and send back postcards: planet Earth, year 1220, Cherokee people, Great Smoky Mountains.

"That's the offer?" said Trama incredulously. "Isn't that the kind of thing you do all the time, Dunton? What's the problem?"

"The problem is that the Cherokee people only travel by canoe," said Dunton indignantly.

"You see," explained the poet goblin, "vessels take the form of a mode of transportation familiar to the associated soul. The only vessels which can travel to the Cherokee people are canoes. And vessels require a crew of five goblins to operate."

"I still don't see what the problem is."

The frog raised an eyebrow, "Have you ever tried to fit in a canoe with five goblins and then cross the space-time continuum? It's not very doable, I'm afraid. Dunton would be stuck among the Cherokee people for the rest of his life."

"Well, why do you need a postcard of the Cherokee people so badly?" questioned Trama.

"Yeah, what's so great about the Cherokees?" agreed Dunton.

"I don't understand it myself," said the poet goblin. "But the frogs simply must have a postcard of the Cherokee people."

"They're a very interesting culture," chimed in the frog.

Dunton fiddled with his latte's lid distractedly. "I'm not saying I'm considering the offer. But, if I was, what kind of seating do the Cherokee people prefer?"

The poet goblin squinted at his ledger. "It says here... The Cherokee people don't use chairs. They prefer to sit cross-legged on the ground."

Duntons face fell.

“An extraordinarily interesting culture,” the frog emphasized once more.

At that moment, Action began to make a commotion. Trama ran outside to see what the trouble was. The trouble was vengeful goblins. Four of them.

“You owe us an apology,” said a very squat goblin.

“An apology? You stole my sister’s soul,” said Action.

In rapid succession, the other goblins gave smarmy replies.

“yeah, well you killed one of our friends.”

“Just because we’re professional soul stealers doesn’t mean we don’t have feelings.”

“Imagine waiting on some train for half a week. You finally feed off of enough suffering to get to the surface. Then, before you even kidnap anyone, someone kills your best friend.”

“You owe us an apology or else!”

“I’d rather die!” said Action.

Trama said, “whoa, lets all just calm down-”

Action bolted and ran off into the city. The goblins gave chase. Trama heard a goblin yell out, “hey, that guy helped kill our friend too.”

Suddenly, an angry, squat goblin was running towards Trama. Trama ran. The squat goblin was in horrible shape. Trama sped around a corner and crouched behind a food vendor’s cart. The goblin ran past, wheezing. A very curious food vendor looked down at Trama. It was the same food vendor who had given Trama *deja vu*. It was Sushi Man.

“Sushi Man?” said Trama incredulously.

“Sushi Man? No, I am Kabob Man,” said the vendor. Trama noticed kabobs sizzling on the vendor’s cart.

“No, I’ve definitely met you in another world. You taught me how to make sushi,” said Trama.

“Tell me more,” said Kabob Man. Trama told him about Yellow Lake and Sushi Man.

“Thank you for telling me about this ‘Sushi Man.’ I’ve been considering moving to a new world, but couldn’t imagine a very compelling one. Perhaps I will walk through a magical doorway and become this ‘Sushi Man.’ Here’s a free kabob.”

Trama took a bite of the kabob. It was a pretty decent kabob. Kabob

Man spoke.

"I find myself caring less and less for words, and much more for food. However, it seems that a strange twist of fate has brought you to me. I would like to share my story with you," said Kabob Man.

"A few years ago I did not cook. I was a very different person. I had a wife and child whom I cared very much for. Unfortunately, something very bad happened to them." Trama took the kabob away from his mouth. Kabob Man looked down at his cart. He avoided Trama's gaze as he continued.

"People are busy. People are also kind, but they only have so much time for sadness. They have even less time for selfishness. I allowed myself to be selfish in my sadness. Selfish acts push those close to you further away, which in turn gives you room to grow more selfish. If unchecked, the cycle continues until you are alone. When you are alone, being selfish is meaningless. You are left with only sadness."

Kabob Man waved his hand over the skillet to check its heat. He deftly flipped a row of skewers. "Only finding something to live for stops the sadness. A reason to move on is necessary. For me, that reason is food. I choose and prepare my food very carefully. Do you like my kabob?"

Trama nodded. Kabob Man said, "kabobs are how I moved forward. After a long sadness, the first happiness to return was the work happiness. First I felt that late afternoon contentment which lays upon a day's work. Next came the revelrous evening happiness. Once again, some friend filled moments seem airy and filled with light. And last of all, the morning happiness returned. That happiness is the quiet, simmering type which sinks into your bones and washes over your first meal. I am not saying that happiness occurs every day. But happiness is there, and it always waits on the far side of sadness. It is necessary. It is sufficient."

A man pushed past Trama. The man wanted a kabob. Trama looked at Kabob Man to see if their interaction was over. Kabob Man appeared occupied with sales. Trama walked off. He made his way down the streets of Frog City. WaterFall 45's rooftop crowned the city's skyline. There was a low, dull roar. He wasn't sure if the sound came from WaterFall 45', or from the waterfalls surrounding Frog City. He couldn't assimilate to his surroundings. He couldn't assimilate the events of the previous hour. Too much had happened for him to absorb much of anything. He wandered. Eventually his wandering led him to a wharf. The wharf overlooked the ocean. Far out in the waters, Trama saw a strange dip that might have been a whirlpool. In the

opposite direction, far above him and drenched in fog, he saw a high peak. This was probably the Perch.

Trama couldn't think of anything else to do next, so he returned to the Warfmen. Action was in the ice bath outside their room. His forehead was drenched in sweat from the goblin chase. Towels hung next to a portrait of two frogs in fencing equipment. Trama grabbed a towel and handed it to Action. Wordlessly, the two of them entered their room.

There was a postcard sitting on the roulette table. On the postcard's front was a picture of WaterFall 45'. Trama turned the card over. It was written in almost illegible cursive.

Trama and Action,

I've joined the Cherokee people to make their postcards. I've imagined your gliders onto the Warfman's roof. I imagine there'll be a strong breeze blowing in from the ocean this afternoon.

Truthfully, I thought there wasn't too much left to me. I was all emptied out. Something about your story changed that. This tumbleweed will most certainly continue tumbling, so thank you. Thank you.

*Best,
Dr. Hilary Dunton*

P.S. The second comfiest sofa I've ever sat on is in the lobby of WaterFall 45'. I highly recommend enjoying a newspaper or cup of coffee there.

"That tumbleweed metaphor isn't very imaginative," said Action.

"True. Also, I wasn't completely sure that Dunton was a doctor until now," said Trama.

"Yeah? What changed your mind?"

"You know, doctors have terrible handwriting. I thought it was common knowledge," said Trama, imitating Dunton's affected drawl. They both chuckled for a few minutes. It was all they could do.