

## A Thousand Mile Friendship

Pip waited desperately for the horn of the mail ship. He would hear it before he saw it: A long, whaling cry of a boat seeking a space to dock, and his feet would carry him all the way down from his family's home high on Techo Mountain. The hot, igneous rock would sting the soles of his bare skin as he sprinted across that familiar, winding path, which kept so hot you could see steam rise above it during the breezy, sun-less nights.

His mother's shouts would echo against his back as he raced underdressed out of the house, threats that Potgatkerchi would come in the night and steal his feet should he keep trampling them barefooted across the great land. Pip didn't heed his mother's tales. He had been doing this for almost six months now, and he still had ten toes and two soles to his name.

Each time that low, rumbling bass cut across the island and rattled the palms against his bedroom window, Pip burst out the front door and ran.

He could have put his shoes on and waited. He could have had an umbrella ready, for rain was always common on the island and when it rained, it came down in sheets so blinding you'd have a hard time making the journey back on a road you've traveled a hundred times. But where was the excitement in being so prepared? Pip knew the boat, stocked with goods, trade, and most importantly, mail, would come by every second Friday as it always had, and yet he ran out the home unprepared each time, like he never expected it to arrive at all.

Writing and sending the letters was only half the fun. Rushing down to meet the mail captain in a breathless fury was the other half. Tearing open the usually sun-bleached envelope, sitting on the dock, and catching his breath as his friend Carp, a thousand miles away in Meridell, caught him up on her life. This was the way Pip enjoyed their friendship the most.

So when the low rolling bass swept over the island that day, he took off down the hot, winding path, towards the bustling Harbour where dozens began their preparations for the arriving ship. There were goods to receive, goods to stow on board, and occasionally traffic-blocking confusion of a couple ill-prepared tourists who thought the cheaper fare of the goods-and-mail ship was a better deal than the passenger-only boats. Any Mystery Island resident could tell you that was a foolish mistake, for the journey from Meridell was two weeks long, and the service-only ship had no private rooms, no special meals, and certainly no comfortable bedding. Pip had to dodge carefully between their wobbling legs and dart past their haggard, regretful faces.

The mail captain was a tall, barrel-chested Elephante who wore clothes just a size too small, a funny sight to witness. He would direct cargo and shout orders all while the buttons on his shirt threatened to burst, which made Pip like him even more, especially compared to his chief mail mate. There was something too serious about that other man, a Jetsam with starched attire and an iron look in his eyes.

And the mail captain took a liking to him too. Days of dealing with hardened sailors and sharp ocean winds will open your heart to the soft excitement of an expecting kid. Letters and non-merchant goods were usually offloaded to the local postmen, who would haul the shipment away quickly to distribute across the island and for two months, this young boy was there every docking, rifling through the mail before the workers could even finish unloading. If he didn't find what he was looking for, the boy would scurry after the workers and continue to rifle through the often large pile of mail and deliveries until he unearthed a single, square envelope. After the third month of watching the boy do this, the captain approached him.

"Boy," he started, and the youth jumped like a cat caught doing something wrong. He looked up at him with large, brown eyes, and the letter shook in his hands.

"What you been doin' these last few months? I always see you digging through them deliveries, looking for one little letter." He pointed with his trunk down at the envelope. He saw now that it was sealed with the stamp of Meridell.

"I-I," the boy stammered.

He was out of breath, and his hair was windswept like he had just run a marathon. He swallowed and held the letter closer to his chest. "I have a friend in Meridell. Her name is Carp. She writes to me every time the mail comes. She's my best friend. I think."

The captain thought he was stealing. Or intercepting something before it got to his parents. But the truth was so sweet it threatened to chip his sea-hardened heart. He stole a look away at the letter and saw "To Pip" scrawled on the front in bright red.

"Oh yea, Pip?" he crouched down to the boy's height. "How'd you meet her?"

Pip's face lit up.

**(Work in Progress)**