

A Dream for the Stars

It was a typical, rainy night of claustrophobia, petty thefts, and scarcely any water. Shouts echoed through the narrow, dimly lit alleyways accompanied by heavy footsteps. I turned the corner and saw two people sprint past me. There was a loud crash as crates were knocked over and teeth were knocked out. A barefooted teenager dressed in rags kicked the man chasing him off of him and scrambled away, chased by a string of foul yet ingenious combinations of curse words.

“Hey, are you alright?” I reach my hand out to the man groaning in pain.

“Damn, sniveling thieves,” the man takes my hand and hoists himself up, but not without another revolting yet genius combination of curse words. “Thanks fer the help, lad. You ever see ‘im, give ‘im a good beating ye hear?” He was a man of short stature and a slight beer belly. His head was shining bald, and he was dressed in clothes only slightly better than the thief’s. The most noticeable thing about him was his unusually neat beard and black eyepatch. I must have stared at his beard for a second too long, as he boasted, “Ah, mesmerized by me beard I see! I don’t blame ye, yer not the first.” He lets out a loud, hearty laugh, his belly jiggling to intonations of his laugh.

“I must admit, you do have quite the exquisite beard,” I wondered if he had already forgotten about the entire ordeal and being kicked.

“A man! A real man! What’s yer name, lad?” he pats my back with the force of a cannon. “Tom. You?” I ask as I struggle to stay standing.

“The name’s Boro. Ye don’t talk like us. Where ‘r ye from?” he had quite the round sounding name, which suited his round outline quite well.

“Two villages down. I’m just passing by,” I replied.

“Ah well here ain’t a pretty place t’ visit. Yer better off leaving as soon as ye can!” “Why?”

“... Ye drink ale?”

“Uh I suppose? What does that have to—”

“Alrighty lad, come with me. We’re gon’ have a talk over some ale!” he puts his arm around my shoulder and drags me with him all the while booming with laughter. I was curious about the tribe here anyways, so I decided to just go along with him. Little did I know, his unfaltering joy had already infected me a little bit.

We walked a few sets of stairs and climbed some ladders to get to the middle layer of the city. Along the way, we were confronted by multiple guards but they immediately let us through when they recognized Boro. This made me rather curious about what kind of man Boro was, and why he was so well-respected. When we arrived at the middle layer, I was stunned. In comparison to the lower layer, the middle layer was much more spacious and well-lit. The sounds that occupied the atmosphere were chattering and laughter. Clinks of beer mugs and cheering could be heard in the distance. A multitude of sweet aromas filled the air, and I could feel my stomach rumble more intensely than Boro’s laugh. We meandered our way through the much cleaner streets while Boro pointed out various restaurants and shops like we were on a tour. Everything was much more lively, and I noticed that everyone’s clothes were like Boro’s or better. No one was dressed in rags or was barefoot. After visiting countless stores, we finally arrived at the tavern Boro kept rambling on about.

“And we’re ‘ere! Welcome t’ The Lady!” Boro bellowed as he swung the door open. I followed him to the bar and we were greeted by the bartender.

“Boro! Brough a new friend, eh?” the bartender almost dislocates my shoulder when we shake hands, “Lookin’ like quite the dapper young man!”

“Hahahaha,” Boro’s laugh booms across the tavern, “You betcha! Man’s ‘ere is an appreciator of me beard!” Boro hands the bartender five gold coins, “Two Boro Rocks! With extra sugah!”

“You have a drink named after you?” I was almost as impressed by this as

his beard.

“Ye, I supported its opening by buying 10 mugs of beer on t’ first day!” he and the bartender bellowed in laughter like two whales. I smiled. Their ridiculous laughs and friendly demeanors were quite contagious. As Boro struck up a conversation with the bartender while he prepared the Boro Rocks, I looked around. People were more finely dressed in the tavern, and just neater in general. Everyone seemed so full of joy.

“ ‘Ere boy, drink up! Cheers!”

“Cheers!” we crash our mugs into each other’s, spill a little bit, and down the beer. I managed to finish half, but Boro finished everything before I even finished half. I wasn’t the least bit surprised however, he had to get his belly from somewhere.

“Another one!” Boro roars.

“Hey, could you tell me why I shouldn’t stay here?” I finally decided to get to the point, “It seems pretty fun and lively here.”

“People ‘ere ain’t as honest as they might seem. People in this tavern right now ain’t much better than that snivelin’ thief, ye know,” Boro turns towards a group of finely dressed people, “Them right there? Liars.”

“What do you mean liars?”

The bartender hands Boro his beer and with a great, big sigh, Boro downs the entire thing in one swift gulp. “Listen ‘ere, cause I’m only gon’ say this once, and it’s a long one.”

Boro went on to explain the horrible situation behind the scenes. The city is controlled by aristocrats, wealthy tycoons that live on the top layer of the city. Because they live on the top layer, they install numerous contraptions to capture all the rainwater. Apparently, the rainwater is the city’s main source of fresh water. And due

to their geographical advantage, the aristocrats essentially have a monopoly and decided to sell fresh water at unaffordable prices. Barely any water escapes the upper layer, which means the lower layer gets scarcely any water even on a rainy day. As a result, many who have no means of affording the overpriced fresh water turn to petty crime as a means of living. “Ye remember that thief? Ye, he’s probably someone who has no choice,” Boro shook his head in disappointment, “I even offered ‘im a job, and he decides to steal from me? From the great Boro?” Boro downs another Boro Rock, even faster than before. Apparently, given the amount of crime, there is actually a black market very deeply-rooted in society. Boro explained that he has talked to some black market dealers before, and that almost all of them were just trying to survive in this society riddled with greed and corruption. I processed what he said so far and concluded that the city’s power dynamic is essentially the aristocrat controlling fresh water, giving them an undefeatable advantage over the rest of the people. Clearly, the corruption runs extremely deep because there does not seem to be any sort of judicial or justice system holding the aristocrats accountable. Even before that, there does not seem to be much keeping the petty thefts and the black market in check. Just as I was about to ask Boro about the city’s enforcement of the law, he downed a Boro Rock and promptly fell asleep. His snores echoed through the tavern like thunder, and everyone laughed.

“This ‘ere a common occurrence. Don’t worry,” the bartender assures you, “He’ll wake up in no time.”

“So should I just leave him here?” I ask.

“Ye, I’ll look after ‘im,” the bartender replies.

“Ok. When he wakes up, let him know that I went to get some fresh air,” I tell the bartender and he nods in response. I stood up and walked out of the tavern. It’s been a few hours, but it seems like the middle layer’s nightlife has just started. More people flooded the streets than when I first arrived. And although there were many happy faces to be seen, I could not shake off the uneasy feeling that some of them were

people completely fine with taking advantage of others. Suddenly, the lights of the streets seemed less vibrant and all the laughter faded into background noise. I sighed as I thought about the thief from earlier. Perhaps the reason why Boro did not stay mad for long was because he knows the severity of the situation. I did not know where to go, but I wanted to briefly go somewhere else, away from all the fake masks people were putting on. I began walking around and climbing random flights of stairs.

By some miracle, I see a young boy dressed in rags snooping around. I immediately recognized him to be the thief. Curious, I quietly tail him as he inconspicuously made his way up different stairs and ladders. Clearly, the boy was athletic, but the way he scaled the stairs and ladders felt like this was a route he takes incredibly often. He began scaling roofs, and I knew that I could no longer follow him without him noticing me.

“Hey, kid!” I shout. He looked at me and began climbing faster, “Hey! I just want to talk! I’m not trying to hurt you, I promise.” He looked back at me, did a quick scan, and stopped.

“What do you want?” he spoke just like me.

“... You talk differently than the others here,” I tried to start the conversation by pointing out what we had in common, “You talk like me. Where are you from.”

“Not from here,” he hesitates for a while, as if deciding whether or not to trust me, “I’m from two villages up.”

“Oh, wow, haha. Well, I’m from two villages down!” I chuckle.

“Really? I’ve never gone down before.”

“There’s not much to see, I don’t think. I can’t really think about anything special that you probably could not see elsewhere. Well why are you here? Not the best place to live, from what I’ve heard.”

“I don’t want to leave my brothers and sisters here.”

“Ah... that’s admirable of you.”

“...” he doesn’t respond, and just stares at me. However, he is a lot more relaxed now that he didn’t see me as a threat.

“You mind if I join you?” I ask the boy.

“... Sure,” he turns around and begins climbing again. Now that I did not need to worry about my noise level, I began scaling the building. Given its crude architecture, there were a surprisingly plentiful amount of places to step and grab. Still, it took my all to even keep up with the boy. When we reached the top, I could tell that he barely broke a sweat while I was gasping for air. He sat down and looked at me. I sat down next to him and sighed.

“You come here often?” I pant.

“Yea. Whenever I can,” he replies.

“It’s nice up here. You don’t really need to see how ugly people are,” I commented, with my disgust of the aristocrats still fresh in my mind.

He chuckled, appreciating my cynicism. I asked him if there was anything he wanted to know about the world below this city. His questions came at me pretty slow at first, but it began ramping in speed exponentially. As we broke the ice with every story, he seemed more like a normal kid that just wanted to learn more about the world. He began laughing a lot, made immature jokes, and was so melodramatic. I gave him my life story, how I am the son of a father that was a reckless traveler, and a mother that was a caring nurse. If it were not for my mother, my father would have traveled more. But because my father fell so hard for my mother, my father promised my mother that he would settle down with her. However, he did break the promise one time, and my mother was furious.

“My father claimed that he’s braved many dangers before,” I laughed, “but he’s never feared for his life that much.” The kid howled in laughter. He kept on

asking me about more stories regarding my parents. I was curious as to why he was so invested in my family, but I had a guess in mind. I decided to not ask in case I was right.

I continued with many more stories. I'll admit, I ended up exaggerating more and more. It felt good to see the kid so excited about life, and I didn't want to disappoint him with any boring stories. We talked for so long, I began to wonder if Boro had even woken up yet. As I began to run out of stories and creative fuel, I asked him who he usually comes here with.

"Nobody," he looked down.

"Really? Keeping this spot a secret, huh?" I joked.

"It's not that... Everyone's just too afraid to come with me."

"What are they afraid of?"

"They're afraid they'll get caught and locked up. Ordinary citizens like us are not allowed up here"

"Well, why aren't you scared?"

"..."

I looked at him. He smiled sadly.

"Because down there, we are all locked up anyways. This is the only place where I am free."

I looked up and gazed at the infinity of twinkling stars, all gazing back at me. A shooting star streaked across the sky canvas like a gentle stroke of a brush. Amidst the captivating beauty of the night, the noisy chatter below us died out into the background. There was no breeze blowing, no insects chirping, and no smell of ale. In the dead of night, we sat there in serene silence. I understood what he meant, and I felt frustration swell up in me. Such a bright-eyed kid like him did not deserve this. No

one deserved this.

“Have you ever heard of a rainbow?” he asked.

“I’ve seen two before,” I replied.

He looked at me, eyes brimming with excitement, “Really??” He handed me a sealed glass bottle. “Can you catch one for me? I’ve always wanted to see one!”

“You don’t get rainbows down here? Doesn’t it rain all the time?” I asked.

“I don’t know why, but we never get any rainbows down here. Please?” he pushes the glass bottle into my hand.

I smiled and took the glass bottle. I didn’t have the heart to tell him it was an impossible task. What was worse, crushing someone’s hopes and dreams, or feeding into false hopes? Nevertheless, I did not have the heart to disappoint him.

“Sure, kid,” I promised. I stood up, “I have a friend waiting for me. I think I need to check up on him.”

“Aw, okay,” he pouted, “When are you leaving the city?”

I smiled sadly, “Tomorrow. Sorry, kid. I’m a traveler and I don’t think I can bear the people here. He stood up and tackled me with a hug. For a moment, we just hugged each other. One of us was glad to have met someone to give him hope that the world is bigger than the dump they lived. The other was glad to be able to support and cheer someone on to make it through the tougher times in life. And we both knew that. We separated, and I climbed down from the roof.

“Bye mister! If you catch one just throw the bottle into the river! I’ll be waiting everyday!” he waved back.

“What’s your name, kid?”

“Tharros! You?”

I was shocked at how much cooler his name was compared to mine, "I'm Tom. It's nice to meet you."

He smiled. He began crying. The more his eyes watered, the louder he got.

"Thank you for coming up with me! Thank you for believing in me! Thank you for being my friend!"

"You got it, Tharros. Be brave, and I hope that one day you and your siblings leave for somewhere happier. I will definitely return someday to see you. Until then, stay strong, okay?" I could feel the tears roll down my cheeks.

"Of course! That's a promise!" he sobbed.

I smiled. There stood a kid, dressed in rags. With his unkempt hair and dirty face, one would simply dismiss him as a beggar. But, he had the richest smile in the world. And I knew that no one could ever keep that locked up.

I went back to The Lady to find Boro waiting for me, impatient and grumpy. I apologized to him and explained everything that happened. His expression softened, and I could tell that he was reflecting heavily on what he did before. On the walk back to his place, he was unusually quiet. For the first time today, or in his life probably, he was in no mood for a hearty conversation. But neither was I. To think that a kid would have such a huge impact on my life and Boro's was both amazing and sad. It was sad because Tharros had to go through so much to have such an impact. And I didn't even have the heart to ask him about his personal situation. I was a coward.

"Well, ye can crash 'ere for the night," said Boro.

"Thanks. I'll be gone as soon as I wake up tomorrow," I assure him.

"Eh, yer welcome 'owever long," he said as he laid out a mattress for me next to his bed. "Thanks, Boro," I climbed into the mattress, "You're a really nice guy, you know that?" "... Not to the kid I wasn't."

"I understand how you feel."

"Ye didn't punch 'im."

"No I didn't, I'm just a coward."

We laid there in silence. The world suddenly felt bigger. There existed more things than ale and fun, travels and sightseeing. I heard Boro trying really hard to cover up his sniffing, but to no avail.

"I'm gon' look for this kid," Boro sniffled, "I'm gon' find 'im and apologize." Boro lets out a deep exhale. "I'm gon' make 'im work for me, and I'm gon' help 'im provide for his siblings," Boro began tearing up again. "I'm gon' become a better man! I've got to turn this wretched city 'round!"

I began sobbing too. I was feeling everything. Sadness, frustration, determination; I just wanted the kid to be happy and Boro as well. I almost considered staying, but knowing the coward that I was, I decided that I would stay after I became a stronger person.

"Me too, Boro. I'm going to become a stronger person and come back to help you. I swear on my life," I promised Boro.

"Yes! We're brothers from 'ere on out!" Boro declared suddenly.

"Huh? Oh... okay yea. Let's do it!" I didn't know what came over Boro but I chimed in agreement anyways. We spent the rest of the night sharing our life stories and talking about how we were going to become better people. Mid-story, Boro began snoring, And that was my cue to rest my exhausted body.

I woke up to a sudden outburst of thunder. I sit up, and the morning sun pierces my eyes. It turns out, the thunder was Boro and his snoring. I get up and organize his mattress to put away. Then, I gathered my belongings, packed them all into my bag, and used the restroom.

“Oi, Tom!” Boro shouted from his bedroom.

“Yea?” I shouted from the restroom.

“Oh, I thought ye left already. Want breakfast?” Boro asked.

“It’s okay Boro, you’ve done enough for me already. I’ll get going.” I washed my hands and put on my backpack.

“Wait, take this before you go. Man’s gon’ need to stay strong, ye hear?” Boro handed me a huge loaf of bread and a fat stick of butter.

“Thank you, brother,” I smiled. Boro stood up straight, cleared his throat, stuck out his hand, “Until we meet again, brother.” I grasped his hand, and he brought me in for a hug. He pats my back with the force of a thousand suns, and this time, I return the favor. We finished hugging and he stared at my arms. “Work on them arms of yers, I expect more hearty pats!” Boro sighed in disappointment.

“Hey, you better watch yourself. It’s going to hurt next time we meet,” I challenged.

Boro bellowed one last hearty laugh before finally sending me off. As I stepped outside of the city, I fought the urge to look back. I believed in Tharros and Boro. The next time I look at the city, is when I am determined to come back and make a difference. I took Tharros’ glass bottle out of my bag and stared at it. Even if I couldn’t catch a rainbow, I knew I would catch something worth telling a story over. And so, I set out.