

The Dance of Unada

I rouse awake, sunbeams slipping onto my face like raindrops, dancing playfully across my cluttered room. Stepping through piles of unfinished homework, my mind drifts to visions something more, something new – to fantasies of *adventure*.

Snapshots of fallen titans and standing soldiers race through my mind as I pace. Downstairs, Mom sits at the table, eyes gazing into a mug that'd long gone cold.

“Morning,” I say, as she responds with a weak smile.

I grab a piece of bread, trying not to wince at the taste.

“We got a letter last night,” mom says suddenly.

I crack a grin, excitement uncontrollable.

“And? What’d it say?” I ask, eager.

As the words left, her cheeks tightened, gritted teeth hidden behind her lips.

“To: Island of Unada. ‘I’ll be back soon, Eris! Wait for me back home!’”

“..Oh.” I blurt, disappointed.

“W-well, I’m sure he’s being truthful this time!! I mean, I’m just looking forward to all the tales about giants, and dragons.. Oh! And maybe even-”

“You’re being too optimistic, Roland. He’s not coming back -- I’d given up on that long ago. That man, always babbling on about this “adventure” nonsense-”

“And what’s wrong with that?” I ask, sharper than intended.

“Surely, dad saw something that we didn’t. Something past the sea, something that *mattered* enough to abandon us for. If I can’t see those same things, then how could I call myself his son?”

She sighs, prowling forward as her eyes grow soft.

“Listen, Roland. In this world, it is the *people* that matter most. They cultivate us, make us who we are.”

She stops, quivers breaking through her breath.

“Your father abandoned those very people to chase a vision he couldn’t even prove. You must *never* become like him, Roland. *Never*.”

“..Yeah, I got-”

“Promise me.”

"I promise."

I make my way outside, eyes locking onto my right shoe – the only relic my father left behind all those years back.

"When *will* you arrive?" I ask myself.

That's when a man staggered onto my path. His skin was decayed, bubbling under the unforgiving rays of Summer. Yet his face, strangely, was untouched, lips still creeping through tanned skin.

"Curse you, King Hades! May the heavens themselves rue the day of your birth! May your name–"

His words cut short, mouth foaming as he stutters. I step back, wary of a sudden lunge. As I move, his bloodshot gaze settles on me, and with a final trembling breath, he presses a folded paper into the earth.

"Please," he utters, breath fading at last.

I kneel down, closing his eyes shut as I give him my coat for comfort.

"You'll need this," I murmur, hands rising to deliver me his gift. On the paper he gave laid a map, decorated with skulls, leading to what seemed to be a treasure of some kind.

"What's that you've got there?" shouts a distant voice. I turn around, smiling as *he* arrives.

"Oh, James! Check this out, I think I've found myself a treasure map!"

The boy leans closer, squinting dramatically until forcing open in realization.

"Roland, this is no ordinary treasure map!"

"What do you mean?"

"This map.. believe it very well may lead to the ruins of Micanan!"

My ears rise, intrigued.

"Wait, *Micanan*? You mean *the* ruins of *Micanan*???"

"Yeah, you know about it?"

"Oh I *know* about it, alright! The land of miracles, where anything was possible! It's the *one* thing my father used to talk to me about! 'Go discover it,' he'd say while laughing, eyes drawn to a distant something I couldn't see. I'm virtually an expert!"

James cracks a smile.

"So you *are* familiar with it! Ah, but too bad it's probably fak-"

"James, we *have* to visit this place."
Concern danced across his face.

"Dude, you're insane. That's gonna get us killed!"

He turns to the corpse beside us, quaking at the sight.
"We don't know what this map holds for us, we'd best play it safe."

--Huuuuh-- I mock, dragging out the middle section. "I would've thought that *you*, our neighborhood's golden boy, would be more honorable than that. Ah, guess I thought wro-"

"Let's go. Now."

I give a victorious laugh as the two of us dash through sun-hued streets, his face stern as my chortles grow strong.

And then, without warning – the ground drops from beneath us, swallowing us whole as we shriek.

"Bleh!" I say, spitting out dirt.

"Ah, where are we?" asks James, drowsy.

"I don't.. Woah."

Through my starstruck vision I see pillars, basking in the dim lights that slithered from above. Without a second thought my legs move, cackling until James snatches me by the arm.

"At least *try* thinking about our situation for once! We've just been plunged down to what looks like Hades, and your *first* thought is to waltz right into- "

"Ah, come on! What use would it do us to stay put? Enjoy the ride, for once!" I say, giggling loud enough for *anyone* to hear.

Our steps echo through the crackly pillared ruins, walls decorated in yellowish paint that smelled of tar.

"Roland, I think I found the exit," James whispers. I scurry to him, yet the door he found was no escape, but rather the gate to a town square. We walk inside, hesitant, anxiety slowly lifting as we approach the center.

At the room's core stood a massive mural, glowing faintly, as if inviting us in to see the stories it held for centuries.

I approach it, brushing its shell, leaving a mark to prove to future explorers that I was here.

"I've found it," I murmur, eyes drawing above. "The place you dreamed of."

Two kingdoms – one blue, the other red. A wall split the two, each country distinct. The left side, dyed in blood-red, housed a land of vitality. Under a single, fiery sky the people danced together – children, adults, and elders, all laughing as the days flew by.

The right, tinted ocean blue, was home to a field of hermits, Under a swirling azure sky they wrote and drew, living in peace throughout turmoil and war.

At the center of the mural stood a square, crowned in pillars, blended in a mix of red and blue. From both sides of the wall the people gathered, dancing under a single, unifying sky amidst seas of differences.

To my left was James, analyzing the dances of the red as I remain idle, eyes tilted up in wonder.

“It must be here somewhere!” echoes an approaching voice.

Our ears shoot up, dashing behind a nearby pillar for cover. From the corner I peek my head out, small enough to stay hidden, and there he was – a tower of a man, head hidden behind his crown -- King Hades.

The man steps forward, eyes stern.

“So? Can you destroy it?”

“N-no, Your Majesty,” the soldier stammers. “Our weapons couldn't destroy a structure of this caliber.”

The king exhales slowly, almost disappointed.

“A nation survives on its stories,” he murmurs. “Control the story, and you control the people. Let it wander, and it begins to think for itself.”

His fingers brush the mural’s painted sky.

“This place.. It remembers too much..”

The man stops, spotting something amongst the mural. The mark of a hand, formed only recently.

“Seal the entrances,” he says at last. “Execute any citizen who draws near here. We must keep it hidden, at least until it is erased.”

“Y-yes, Your Majesty.”

The king turns, cloak dragging across the stone below as rhythmic steps followed.

“E-execution?” mutters James, body convulsing amidst rapid breaths. “What are we gonna do? Think of something, Roland! You’re the one who got us into this mess!”

I turn to the ruins, seeking an answer -- a miracle, God, anything, yet they stayed silent.

"Le-let's get out of here." I mumble, trembling. "We'll figure this all out later."

James nods, crouching low until the sounds of steps ceased.

Silence.

We rush to the distant light, running to sights of freedom until – snap. A net jerks up, barely missing us as we jump. On the grass we lay, blades stabbing our palms as we stare, hearts throbbing.

And we run.

Through lemon-drowned fields of grass, lungs collapsing as our feet sway. When we reached the town square, our legs gave out as we collapse.

Mid-breath, James then turns to me, eyes drowned in rage.

"Roland, you just *had* to throw it all away, right?" he screams. "Our lives of peace, all abandoned for your "adventure". Was it worth it, Roland? Tell me!"

"Shut up for once!" I retaliate, scornful.

"Think about what *I* feel, James! I have things to live up to – I'm the son of a legend, the only man who'd escaped this hellhole for a country! The day he returns – how could I look a man like *that* in the eye, knowing I'd abandoned his dreams of-"

"Again with this "adventure" talk! That word, it corrupts you! When you placed your hand on that mural, it wasn't *you*, Roland. Your eyes, they saw something else, a future that didn't involve *me*. And now, I'm about to die for it."

I stare at him speechless, his anger choked by unshakeable tremors as he wheezed. Just then, sirens ring across the town. In mere minutes people gathered at the square while the two of us stood, opposite and distant.

As we all waited, the ground opened, revealing seas of soldiers holding walkie talkies.

"Greetings, citizens." called a voice amidst static.

"It is with great pride that I call you here today. For this very place marks the day we catch the man breaking through our condemned ruins."

The soldiers lift their hands to reveal a shoe – mud-brown, ugly. I look up horrified. That shoe was *mine*, the only vestige that dad left behind.

"Sorry, sire! That was me!" jested a man, interrupting the crowd's mutters. His teeth were crooked, his accent strange, but the eyes – the eyes that saw something no one else could.

"Roko Sang! Unada's greatest archaeologist, at your service!"

The king pauses, silence dipped in hate.

“Of course it had to be you.”

The man’s smile grew.

“What’s wrong? Still bitter about my escape twenty years back?”

As the man spoke my eyes widen, a crooked smile cracking upon my face once more.

“So it’s true,” the king replies, voice cold.

“You’ve returned to destroy our nation with your accursed knowledge.”

“Accursed?” the man asks. “Don’t be so cruel! I’ve got nothin’ to lose! Might as well learn something before I go out, and what better to learn than the secrets of the world’s most shrouded nation!”

The king’s voice grew, words suddenly cut off by radio static.

“My my, how fortunate!” The man quips, grinning as chuckles dance through.

“Well then, can’t suppress my tongue, can I? Listen up, folks! I’m about to tell you the story of a lifetime!”

Our ears perch up, an enraged scream blocked by radio static.

“Long ago, there lived two kingdoms! One red, the other blue. They lived in harmony, cultures blending as they sang together, dancing and singing under a single sky. Imagine that – unity!”

We stared up. Some in wonder, some in fear.

“Yet that couldn’t last, could it? Just like the rest of those out there, greed tore them apart! War erupted across the two nations, and by the end, the kingdom of *Red* triumphed!”

The radio static grew dimmer by the second, screams raging like typhoons as he flicked a look.

“Listen closely, comrades! I tell you, this very kingdom of Unada is indeed the kingdom of Red that once stood! They united their swords, slicing off a great area of land from the main world to the open seas. That’s *us*, folks!”

The static recedes as gasp ripple across the audience.

“You fool! Just what are you telling them?” screamed the king, words raving.

“Does the past scare you *that* much, Hades? Revolt, Fear, and Truth -- these are elements you can never suppress, Hades! They’re *human*, linked with us to our very core! No man can ever break that connection!”

As the man spoke, clicks of guns echoed through the square.

“Now, for my people that hear me now, I ask you to depart with these final words!

The man inhales, smile soaked in ethereal bliss.

"The voices of our past,"

The winds go quiet, as if the lands themselves listened.
"Won't go unheard!"

Gunfire shrouded his final smile, rivers of red descending like doves.

"Thud," went his body, descending to the earth once more.

This day would be erased from history, but we remembered. I remembered.
Back home, my mind ached.

"After all those years I'd spent *waiting* for you, *what* did it amount to?" I shriek, eyes welling with regret.

"The adventure you spoke of, what horrors did you see out *there* that led you back to this hellhole of a country?"

Questions raced through my mind as I scrambled for answers, yet those same answers never came.

And so, I began to write my own.

Stories of what are – classroom days without banter, whispers of new laws, and walking to the town square to see James dancing, teaching a group of kids whatever motion he came up with.

"Hands up, elbows curled, march! That's it!" he said, eyes losing their luster of regret.

Years passed, laws grew stricter, but I kept writing.

One day, amidst my journaling I noticed Mom staring, her face a messy mix of pride and fear. Yet even then, my adventures didn't stop. They became *real*, as I went on to traverse through hills and beanstalks alike.

Stars passed, birthdays railed by, but James and I just danced and wrote, kindling the rhythms that remained.

And now, we're adults. I'm shuffling through my backpack to ensure nothing's left behind.

Knock Knock. A rhythm all too familiar.

"What are you planning, Roland?"

I pause, eyes drawn somewhere else.

"Sorry, Ma. I'm going out."

"..To where?"

"To the sea, where dad went." She sighs, tears slowly crawling down.

"If you're looking for your dad, you should give up. The man that died years back, in the square-"

"I know, Ma. I've known for a while."

She stops, small trembles breaking through.

"So I'm guessing you have *other* reasons to want to sail?"

I nod.

"..I see." she whispers. "The vision your father saw. You see it too, don't you?"

She creaks the door open, gazing into my pupils as tears build.

"The joy in your eyes, it hasn't faded."

She stops again, only this time, for a smile.

"I'm glad, Roland."

I cry, falling to her arms.

"Stay safe." she whispers.

"I will," I stammered, heading off to the new.

And now, here I am – sitting on the stairs of Treaty Port, staring at the infinite blue ahead. Docked nearby was a boat, swaying in the soft winds that blew. My face draws to the sea. awestruck. A land stretching far enough to blend with the stars, housing treasures great enough to make men abandon everything.

"What a strange place," I thought.

"Ring!" My hand flinches, phone dropping as a crack sounds.

"Who is it?" I ask, clutching hard in case of another shock.

"Hey, Roland. It's James."

My face crumbles, words trapped just as that day.

"It's been a while since we'd talked but, I feel it'd be good to catch up."

"..Yeah." The breeze whooshed in place of our silence, nudging us to go further.

I take a deep breath, a mash of courage and cowardice.

"James," I utter. "I'm sorry. For dragging you into that mess, and the mistakes I made, and--"

"It's alright," he chimes. "In the end, none of us were harmed. That fact alone is something to celebrate, isn't it?"

I pause, glad.

"I see. That's great, then."

..How's your dance business going?"

I could *hear* his face go red.

"Y-you know about it?"

"C'mon, who *doesn't* know about it?" I quip.

"Heh, so we're *spying* now, are we?"

"What? Where'd you conclude *that* from?"

..Did you actually think I didn't notice you all those times at the market?"

My face blooms red, sulking in my failure.

"Say, guess what! I've actually got a *girlfriend*." James says, adding insult to injury.

"Seriously?? How were *you* able to acquire one and *I* didn't?"

"I'm telling you, dance is the way to go! Women love those types of things!" he says as I sit utterly defeated.

--But what about you, Roland?"

"Hm?"

What do you plan for the future? It's been a while since we've talked, and frankly, I'm curious."

I stop for a moment, eyes gazed upon the open seas.

"I'm setting sail."

"Seriously? To where?"

"Don't know."

My words stop, consumed by an untameable smile.

"But so many lands out there remain a mystery to me, each with their own set of things to learn about! It's a gold mine of discovery waiting out there for me!"

James sighs, tone unamazed.

"Well, then. Suppose there isn't a point in stopping you, huh?"

"Nope."

He grunts, thinking up a solution.

"Alright then. In that case, I'll wait for you here. Here on the island of Unada, making sure our people's faces stay smiling. And when you return, it better have been worthwhile."

I smirk.

"It will."

He hangs up as I rise, standing ahead of the blue where the oceans and suns blended. And then, I run. Jumping right onto my boat, legs booming in the march of discovery as the ocean tickles my skin. I let out a final grunt, arms veiny as the sails unfurl, vision locked onto the waters.

"This is what you saw, isn't it?" I utter. "A world beyond the blue, where truth stands free."

A smile cracks on my face, teeth reflecting the sun and oceans afar.

"I'll find it, Dad – the world you dreamed of, the one you chased. Thank you."