

## Happy Birthday

The fires blazed around him, consuming all the oxygen in the small stone chamber. He could hear the collapse of stone, people screaming, arrows zipping through the air, the clatter of metal, stone, and flesh. The smoke was unbearable now. He couldn't breathe.

Lido burst from his dream. The tree outside his window tapped gently on the glass as it swayed with the breeze. *Happy Birthday.*

He wasn't sure if he heard that or not. It was his birthday. He was fifteen years old, probably. He wasn't sure exactly. There was no way to know for sure.

Lido stepped out of bed and crossed the wooden floor to the window, gazing out. The sun was rising now over the edge of Mount Hian. *Happy Birthday.*

For as long as he could remember, Lido had heard these voices. Faint whispers at best, seemingly from the trees or the grass; rocks and stones, but never this loud. His Aunt had always told him to ignore it; he heard things differently because of his ears.

He looked in the oval mirror over his dresser. They weren't that long when he went to bed, he was sure of it. Disgusted, he cupped his hands over them, trying to imagine what he would look like without them, but they were too long. The tips stretched even higher than the top of his head. They had definitely grown. Lido groaned at the thought, and even more so, upon realizing they could possibly grow even longer.

He tussled up his blonde hair and tried to pull it over his ears, but it was no use. There they were.

The sunlight crept over the mountain and shot its light straight into the mirror over Lido's shoulder, its rays caressing his face like a pair of warm lips.

*Happy Birthday. You look so grown up.*

He dressed and dropped down the ladder into the second story hallway. He could hear the sounds of pots and pans clattering. His Aunt June was cooking up a storm. She liked to make a dramatic spectacle out of everything she did, from cooking to cleaning to patching holes on the side of the house. It was her livelihood.

Lido climbed down the stairs into the kitchen. Aunt June was in a flurry; cookware covered the counters, full of flour and dough and fruits and nuts.

"Do you need any help, Aunt June?" His voice cracked as it had been doing for the last couple of weeks. He winced at the sound of it.

She paused momentarily to turn and smile. "Oh no, Lido, I'm just fine. Bakin' a cake!" She continued her work, humming a stunted song happily.

"All this for a cake?" He scanned the room, there were even mixing bowls and cake pans on the floor. "Looks like you're cooking for an army."

"You never know who'll show up to a party. You've got to be prepared." She gave him a wink.

"Are you sure I can't help?"

She stopped completely and pointed her mixing spoon at him. "Boy, ask me to help again and I'll give you a wallop so hard you'll lose your hearing." As she said this, she noticed something different about him. "Are you ok? You look sad."

"Do my ears look bigger to you?" he asked.

She wiped her hands on her apron and paced around him, taking in every angle necessary to give an answer. "I'd be lying if I said they didn't. You are getting older. You know, my father's ears grew like that too," she sighed. "If he had lived another year, they would've been down to his knees."

Lido snickered in spite of himself, but the sensation quickly died.

June changed the subject. "The trade fair's in town. Why don't you go grab your cousin?"

"All right," Lido murmured, turning back to the stairs.

"Oh, and Lido?"

"Yeah?"

"Happy Birthday."

Lido dropped his head sheepishly and continued up the stairs. "Thanks," he said quietly.

June shook her head and turned back to her bowls - mixing again, humming and nodding her head to the half-tune she was humming before.

Pollen was June's son, Lido's cousin. Unlike Lido's simple, neat attic room, Pollen's was decorated to capacity, his walls covered with staff paper and instrument books. His desk, dresser, nightstand, and bed were littered with stacks upon stacks of sheet music.

Ever since he was a child, Pollen ate, drank, and dreamed music. It was his life, as well as his only chance of getting out of the mines. Born to a family of miners, Pollen had little control over his fate. His great grandfather, Pollen's namesake, had come to the mountain looking for work, hoping he would soon make enough money to return home. Unfortunately, as times were, it was hardly profitable, and soon he was forced to have his family move to the

mining town with him. Not long after his son, Pollen's grandfather, Lemuel, was old enough to work in the mines, Grandpa Pollen fell ill, and died.

His grandfather married and had a son - Pollen's father, Garren. At an age younger than retirement, Lemuel broke his leg and was unable to work. Garren took his place in the mines, much younger than usual to support his father. Lemuel's leg never healed fully, and was eventually removed. But instead of moping, he took his time to carve a wood flute and learned to play, entertaining his son when he returned home.

Garren eventually met June, the daughter of a miner, and they soon fell in love. But they could not marry while Garren was forced to support his father, and June, having lost her father to disease a few years prior, lived off checks her brother in the military sent home periodically, supplementing that by doing odd jobs around town. June grew impatient, and soon she became the cook for the whole mining colony. Between the two of them, Garren and June made enough money to marry.

Pollen was born soon, and became the joy of his grandfather's life. He learned everything his grandfather would teach him about music, and became a young prodigy. People from other mining colonies would sometimes travel to hear the young boy play, and he even heard rumors that the Music Academy of Linka was considering letting him attend, even though he was not of noble birth. Pollen played more than ever.

Pollen's grandfather's dream was to hear his son play for the Academy, but they hadn't the money to send him, so Lemuel got a job as a blaster in the mines, clearing away rock walls that couldn't be mined. The pay was high, but so were the risks. Soon after, Lemuel became deaf from the blasts, and grew ill from the fumes. He made a decent sum, but passed away before long.

When Grandfather died, Pollen was quiet for many years. He dropped his music and resolved to become a miner, like his father. Unfortunately, his father's time had come, and he was killed in a cave-in, the same that took many fathers and sons of the colony. June was so upset that she made Pollen swear to play music again, join the Academy, and escape the deadly legacy of his family.

Over time, music became a source of joy for Pollen again, and a sense of relief for his mother.

Pollen hunched over a stool, blowing notes on his flute, marking notes on a piece of paper, then shaking his head and crossing them out, before giving up and tossing the crumpled paper onto the floor and grabbing another.

A knock on his door and Lido popped his head in.

"You really gotta finish that song. Your mother's been humming the first five notes for a week."

Pollen turned back to his cousin, a tired face answering, "I wish I could."

"Did you sleep at all last night?"

"I tried, but the same five notes kept repeating themselves over and over in my dreams. I couldn't sleep a wink."

"You're usually so quick with these things. They just seem to pop out of you."

Pollen starts gathering up the sheets of paper that survived the crumpling. "Yeah... I guess I don't really know what the song's about. Usually I have an image in my head when I write, but lately, all I see are notes and staff paper."

“You need inspiration... like a sunset, or a baby swan, or...” Lido fought to find the words. “True love.”

“I think I’ll settle for any girl my age at this point. And preferably one that isn’t twice my size.”

“When do you want to go down the mountain?”

Pollen looked over his sheet music, down at his flute, and the piles of books and papers blanketing his furniture.

“Now’s good.”

Today was the tenth anniversary of the end of the Creedon Wars. Ten years since the day the last of the Creedon temples were destroyed. And ten years since the new era of peace began.

There was a major celebration in every major city that day, in every one of the Nations. But at the bottom of the mountain, in the town of Foothill, the celebration was a little different. At the crossroads of all the Nations, Foothill was a market hub for caravans heading south to Nebarra and Rodan, north to Serka, west to Lucra, or east up the mountain. And they celebrated the only way merchants know how to celebrate – by holding a massive sale.

Pollen wrapped himself in his favorite canteen, clipped his flute to it, and was ready to go. They were greeted by June at the foot of the stairs.

“Don’t forget your hat, Lido,” June sighed.

He labouredly lifted the wool knit cap from the hatstand by the door and pulled it over his ears. It was stuffy and uncomfortable, and honestly, he thought it stood out a little. It was bright yellow with this little green pattern running around the base and a pommel on top. But June was

more than aware of the stigma that led others to fear or hate someone with ears of Lido's unfortunate size, and she loved him like a son. So she knitted him this cap, with a little extra space to house his incongruity. It felt a little extra tight that day.

Always the moderator, Pollen had requested a hat of his own, but of course, being the second generation, was a slightly more attractive model, no pommel, all black, and of course, the ears weren't crammed inside. Lido never had the heart to ask for a different hat, but he was secretly jealous.

"We'll see you soon, Aunt June," Lido called from the doorway.

"Bye, mom," Pollen added.

"And be back before sundown." June hugged her son and hugged Lido a little extra. "Happy Birthday, Lido. I'm so proud of you."

As soon as the door closed behind them, Pollen pulled his hat from his head and tossed it over to Lido. "I appreciate it," Lido said while hiding his yellow and green monstrosity under a pile of rocks by their front gate.

Hian Mining Colony #12 was one of many mining colonies administrated by the capitol city of Linka. It was quite dissimilar, however, because it was not very active as a mining colony. Most of the mines in the area had been exhausted to the point where further digging had brought up more deaths than anything.

HMC 12 was a widow's town. Like June, many of the women in the area were alone, living off small jobs, a family member's inheritance, or a husband who worked elsewhere, usually the army, that sent money back home. In fact, the only grown man in town was Donburg Lind.

He was a Serkan, who had made a fortune off the lumber industry there. Having reached the extent of his potential, Lind decided that he needed a new challenge, so he sold his industries and moved to Monta for his next venture: mining.

It was no secret that the mining economy of Monta was not as profitable as it once was. Depleted resources and lower demands had reduced the mining colonies to ghost towns, but Lind found those odds exciting. Unfortunately, the odds were stacked against him, and he soon lost his fortune trying to build a better community, his gamble not paying off.

His sons were too spoiled and, unable to cope with their new standard of living, became unmanageable. The eldest, Frim, ran away; the youngest, Kameryn, became a bully to the rest of the children of the town. To cope with the loss of his first son, Donburg spoiled the other even more.

Kameryn became the local thug quickly, along with his large Montan accomplice, Coren, an orphan of the same cave-in that took Pollen's father. Together, the two became well-known for manipulating and coercing the other children of the community into doing their will, or simply leaving them alone, slightly less wealthy or dressed than before. It was commonplace to walk quickly through town for anyone under the age of eighteen, as Lido and Pollen did that morning.

They ducked behind some trees on the outskirts of the small town to catch their breaths.

"You didn't see them, did you?" gasped Pollen.

"No. They're probably down at the trade fair."

They took one last look around and decided to keep moving.

"By the way, Happy Birthday."

Lido avoided eye contact, as he always did on his birthday. “It’s not really my birthday. It’s the day I got adopted by your mother.” Pollen repeated this last part with Lido.

“I know, I know. You say that every year. But it’s the celebration of you joining our family. That sounds like a birthday to me.”

“Thanks.”

“Now, at some point you’re gonna have to learn to connect that with ‘Happy Birthday’ without all that stuff in between.”

The boys laughed and continued through the forest.

Lido always felt odd on his birthday. And it wasn’t about being adopted. As anniversaries are, they appear on the same day every year. And every year, his birthday fell on the anniversary of the day when the evil hordes of pointy-eared magicians were finally defeated. Pointy-eared freaks like him. Sure, he wasn’t a Creedon. Creedons had magical powers, he was merely a Sprite, but from what he learned in school, that’s how they all started.

They said that Creedons came from Sprites that sold their souls for power, and once they obtained their dark, twisted magic, it changed them. They grew tall and hairy. Their eyes glowed red and their teeth grew even pointier than their ears. The thought of it made Lido shiver.

“Do you want to head back and grab a jacket?” Pollen asked.

“Oh, no, I’m fine. Just let my thoughts get away with me for a second there.”

“You’re not a Creedon, Lido.”

“I know. But what if they’re still around?”

“If they were, the Faction would take care of them. Just like last time.”

Lido dropped his gaze. He and Pollen had this conversation several times in the past, and it always ended the same way.

“Come on,” Pollen added. “The Festival might help you relax.”

Before too long, they could see the cable car station in the distance. To help run people up and down the mountain, the cable cars were built - large coaches, a row of benches encased in a metal, windowed shell, attached to cables that were run mechanically up and down the mountain.

There was a large crowd there, as could be expected. The boys saw the bulk of it cram into one of the cars. When the ushers decided it was full, they signaled for it to start down the mountain, and they waited for the next car to pull in and unload.

“Oh crumb... there they are.”

The pair was immediately noticeable. Kameryn, a tall, thin boy with hair that just stuck out instead of going down. His smirk was always the most crooked when he was picking on someone helpless, in this case, keeping the hat away from a young Montan boy named Levy Topper. And Coren, his bulky friend, a Montan as well, just stood back and watched, occasionally wrestling it from the owner's grasp when he managed to reclaim his article of clothing.

Montans were a strange race. From a distance, alone, Coren and Levy would look like much younger boys than they were, perhaps eight or nine years old, but they stood as tall as the average adult. And they were still growing. Some were known to grow over two feet taller than the tallest human, and could easily lift twice as much. Supposedly they lived twice as long, too.

However, in recent times, the bloodlines of the Montans had thinned out, and their special qualities waned as well.

Levy was at most forty percent. To the untrained eye, he would just look like a chubby child, maybe a little tall for his age. Coren, on the other hand, was huge. Around six feet tall, an inch or two over Kameryn, but broad as a house. At his age, it was hard to tell, but he could have easily been over seventy-five percent, even a hundred, if any pure Montans still existed.

The bullies noticed Pollen and Lido giving glances (but pretending not to see them) and decided to head their way.

“Hey Flute Boy, hey Unbreed. Headin’ down to the trade fair?” Kameryn took swipes at Lido’s hat as he said hello, but Lido ducked out of his reach. “You guys can help us sneak on the next cable car.” With a grunt, Kameryn stretched his arm enough to get his fingers around a loose string at the very top of Lido’s cap, but lost his grip as soon as the hat was free of its head, letting it fall gently to the ground.

“I don’t understand why you feel the need to steal when your dad owns half the mountain,” Pollen snapped as he grabbed Lido’s hat off the ground and gave it back to him. Lido pulled it tight on while he eyed the area, making sure no one noticed.

“It’s more fun this way. You helping or not?”

“No... we brought money so we don’t have to break the law.”

“Suit yourselves. Come on Coren.” He broke through the crowd, ushering his large companion behind him.

Lido picked a blade of grass from his hat and gestured Pollen toward the ticket booth. “Forget about those two. Let’s go.”

“I don’t know how you don’t let them get to you,” Pollen scowled. “I can’t stand those guys.”

“Kameryn’s just bored, and Coren just does what he’s told.”

The boys approached the ticket booth, a little wooden stand under the giant pavilion of the cable car station. On either side of the booth, a soldier stood in a dazzling suit of silver and gold trim armor. They were Faction Soldiers, their armor just a little more polished in celebration of the day.

“Good morning,” Pollen smiled at the ticket clerk, an uncomfortable looking man behind the glass barrier who did not return the smile. “Two tickets please.”

The clerk produced the tickets in a very mechanical manner. “That’ll be six Lucre.”

“What? It’s usually four. That’s all we brought.”

“It’s two for you, and four for the Sprite.” The clerk shot a contemptible look in Lido’s direction, never actually looking at him.

“That’s ludicrous. He’s not a Sprite...”

“Don’t give me that. I saw his ears.”

“Well... the ticket’s not for him.”

“Too late,” the clerk scoffed. “Look son, I don’t make the rules. If I did, that lot wouldn’t be allowed on the cars at all. Probably cause the whole thing to collapse. But that ain’t my business. What is, is that I need to see six lucre or your hind ends scooting off into the distance.”

The crowd around was beginning to get irritable. “What’s the hold up? I want to get down to the Trade Fair! Bleekin’ Sprite. Unbreed Whelp.” But the voices died down quickly, for out of the mess of soldiers, one stood out more than the others. The boys knew Sergeant

Gorrum before he joined the Faction leagues, when he was simply a constable who patrolled the areas between the mining towns for grifters. He was one of the few Montans who was an actual Faction soldier, and the only soldier they'd seen in armor that size.

“Sorry boys,” he mumbled, his giant hands keeping the crowd at bay. His words seeping under his bushy mustache almost sounded like dirt being swept off the floor. “If you can't pay, you can always take the footpath.” Orderly as always.

Pollen took a look back at the crowd before sneering at the clerk. He truly wished he could think of an insult to hurl back at the ticket clerk, but before the words came to him, Lido pulled his shoulder. “Come on,” he said. “Let's go.”

“The walk won't kill you,” the clerk snickered to himself as the boys stomped off.

They ran into Levy, who was standing by one of the large pillars of the station, dusting off his hat. “Tough luck,” he called to them, apologetically. “If you want, I'll walk with you guys. Kameryn made me pay him to get my hat back.”

Pollen started walking in the other direction. “Come on, Lido, let's see if we can get more Lucre from my mother.”

“Hold on.” Lido's attention was caught by Kameryn, lurking by the back of the car, where the luggage handlers were loading cargo.

Pollen looked at him with distaste. “You're not really thinking about going with him, are you?”

Lido was already on his way. “It's the only way we'll get down. Levy, come with us.”

“Yeah!” Levy bumped Pollen as he passed. With a roll of his eyes, Pollen followed.

Behind the cart, the next one was getting ready to pass by.

“All aboard! This cart’s leaving.” The station manager signaled for the ushers to pull back the impatient crowd. “Get on the next one.”

With a burst of steam, the car took to the cable track and started piling off. The luggage handlers kept to their work, tossing bags into the open compartment.

Ducking behind a stack of unloaded crates, Kameryn waited for the perfect opportunity to get onboard. He saw it in the trusting gait of Lido.

“Hey, those kids are trying to sneak on!” He pointed at Lido. A few of the handlers dashed after him. Kameryn and Coren jumped into the luggage bin. The cart kept moving.

Lido dashed off to the side, avoiding the first couple baggage handlers. He turned back to Pollen and Levy and motioned for them to keep going. Pollen jumped on first, then Levy. The car was picking up speed.

“Hurry up, Lido,” yelled Pollen. Lido saw that his friends had boarded, and began running for the car, which had already passed him.

The car was getting faster and faster, and Lido was running out of platform.

“Come on!” A large hand extended down to Lido. He looked up to see Coren swinging from the baggage compartment. He took his hand and Coren swung them both inside, just as the platform hook grabbed the compartment door and closed it behind them.

The cable car glided gracefully down the mountain.