

LitHum's Journey

Andrea Dubbels

2021-04-20

What the- where am I? I sat up with a groan, propping my arms on the dark grass beneath me. Endless trees stretched towards the night sky, the stars shining a bright blue against the black canvas of the sky. The trees were strange, rivets of light running through them and highlighting the pattern of the bark.

I couldn't remember how I ended up there, but instinct drove me to start walking. It wasn't long until I was at the base of a hill, the sun rising with my arrival. As I started up the hill, I noticed that the grass before me began to move in a strange way. I stumbled backwards, realizing that it was the form of a slumbering beast. It hunched on all fours, with shaggy fur and talons longer than I was. It roared in a deep voice, awakening two other monsters behind it.

I screamed, beginning to tumble down the hill as a giant parrot flapped its colorful wings. "SING, GODDESS. *SQUAWK*. I WILL TELL THE LORDS OF THE SHIPS, AND THE SHIPS NUMBERS," it screeched, wildly flying over my head. "SING, GODDESS."

"I can't sing!" I cried, holding my trembling hands over my head.

Another roar drove me to peek between my fingers, fear paralyzing me as I beheld the figure of a gigantic man outlined by the rising sun. His form bulged with muscles, his skin strangely shiny and with a golden hue. "I am so fast, and so beautiful!" he bellowed as he danced around with an imagined enemy, jabbing his sword and lifting his shield in the air. "Now DIE!"

His final shout drove me to run down the hill, throwing myself behind a tree and hiding from the monsters on the hill. I knew that I needed to get out of this weird place, but how was I going to get past the monsters on the hill-?

"Ugh, fantastic. There's another one." An annoyed voice drawled to the right of me, a ghostly man in a tunic nearly driving me to run back to the hills.

“P-please don’t kill me!” I scooted backwards until my back scratched against the bark of another tree.

“How- how would I kill you? Look at this-” he made a fist to punch the branches of the tree, his hand passing right through it. “Use your eyes. Look- do you see any leaves crunching under my feet?” He jumped up and down, furiously maintaining eye contact as he hopped around me. “I’m dead, ok? I’m a ghost.”

“Wh- who are you?”

“I’m a poet. My name’s Virgil. I was sent here to guide you by a very nice lady named Dean Hollibaugh. I don’t want to do this, but she’s a good friend of mine so I might as well make sure that you don’t die.”

“Thank you? I guess?”

“Yeah, whatever.”

“But, um- what are you guiding me to?”

Virgil scrunched his nose as he looked down at me. “What, so you want to stay here? Does it matter where I’m guiding you?”

“I mean, I don’t even know where we are-”

“We are in the Forest of Zoom, a dangerous and dark place for even the most fearless of heroes. Each of these trees represents an hour of your life that you will have to spend sitting in a zoom meeting.”

I gasped. “There’s so many.”

“Astute observation,” Virgil sighed as he rolled his eyes. “At the edge of the Forest of Zoom, at the top of that hill over there, is a magical place of knowledge and on-campus classes. A collection of invaluable wisdom that can only be gathered from reading and discussing masterful literature.”

“Great. You’re going to fight the monsters and get me to the top of the hill?”

“*No*,” Virgil snapped. “What do I look like? I just told you I’m a *poet*. We’ll have to take the long way around. Those monsters are just undefeatable.”

“What are they?”

Virgil waved me towards the trunk of a particularly wide tree, both of

us crouching behind it and staring at the monsters meandering on the hill. “These are the Monsters of Lit Hum. The first, the giant sloth, is the beast of procrastination. It will urge you to put off your reading until eleven the night before class, and then you will have to burn through 100 pages of classic literature in a single sitting.” I shuddered. “The second is the bad translator, Lattimore. It’s verbose writings are nearly impossible to overcome. A brave hero by the name of Emily Wilson has come close to striking it down, but alas, it remains.”

“And what about that weird guy over there?”

“That is the Hero of the Story, personified in Achilles. You love them, but you also hate them. It’s complicated.”

“GODS, I AM BEAUTIFUL,” Achilles bellowed from the hill.

“Come along now,” Virgil started walking. “We’ll see much more of him.” I trailed behind him on a path along the outskirts of the Forest of Zoom, the track leading us downwards until we came across a dark and rocky archway. We paused for a moment, Virgil encouraging me to read the inscription on the gate.

“*What does it mean to be human?*” I read aloud, glancing at Virgil for an answer.

He was also reading the inscription, his hands on his hips as he considered the question. Virgil looked over once he felt me staring. “Hell, I don’t know the answer to that. It’s what you’re trying to figure out throughout the *journey*.” He waved his arms in front of him as if he was presenting the gate.

I nodded along to his words, staring at the obscure darkness beyond the gate. Virgil cleared his throat, waving to the archway again. “Oh, am I supposed to keep walking-?”

“Agh, nevermind. You ruined the moment.” Virgil stomped ahead, speaking again after a few moments of angry muttering. “Soon, we’re going to get to the First Circle of Literature. I like to call it, ‘*All that Greek and Roman stuff*.’”

”Catchy name.”

“Hey, I’m a famous poet. You can’t poke fun at my creative genius.” We entered a cavernous room upheld by massive columns that reached into the shadows of an unseen ceiling. One area was a muddy battlefield, armoured soldiers yelling and stabbing each other while a cheering group of people spectated from above in cushy seats. Another corner of the room had a group of men sprawled out on cushions, chugging wine and giving speeches. There was also an island surrounded by ocean water, a man rolling around in the sand and

wailing about getting home.

“Cool,” I said, picking up a discarded sword on the edge of the battlefield.

“You want to go ask people some questions?” Virgil asked as he floated next to me.

“Um, not really.”

“Wha- No, you have to. It’s part of your participation grade. Now get out there.”

“Can I ask them questions?” I pointed up at the people spectating the battlefield.

“No,” Virgil said quickly. “Those are the gods and goddesses. They suck.”

“WHO DARES INSULT ME?” A bearded man yelled at us, waving around a trident.

Virgil cupped his hands around his mouth. “YOU HEARD ME, NEPTUNE. SCREW YOU!” Neptune screamed, pointing his trident at us. “We should run now,” Virgil encouraged as we started sprinting towards the other side of the cavern.

“I’m gonna talk to the spider-lady,” I told Virgil, veering off towards a giant web.

“Alright,” he said in response. “I have to go insult Ovid. Someone has to bring his ego down a notch.”

I walked towards a massive web containing an appropriately sized spider with a woman’s face. Tapestries that looked like photos surrounded her, the colors impossibly vibrant and detailed. “Yo,” she said when I arrived at the base of her web.

“Hi,” I responded. “I like your tapestries.”

“Thanks,” she said. “If you tell me that they’re better than Athena’s, I won’t eat you.”

“They’re *way* better than Athena’s tapestries.”

“You flatter me.”

I wandered away, watching a court case transpiring where the three Furies were shouting at a young man. "You killed your mother, you jerk!"

"Yeah, well my mother killed my father!"

Damn. This is like ancient reality TV-

"You there! Student!" I turned towards Virgil's voice as he walked over briskly with a man in tow.

"My name is-

"Doesn't matter," Virgil interjected. "This is Aeneas. You'll know him from *my* epic poem, the Aeneid. He's the hero of Rome!"

"Sup," Aeneas said with a slight wave.

"Hey. So, you started Rome after the Trojan war?"

"Yeah," he said.

"Was it, like, to show the defiance of the Trojans?" I asked.

"Not really."

"For revenge?"

"No."

"You wanted the honor and power of a king?"

"Nah."

I glanced between Aeneas and Virgil, trying to come up with another question. "Um, why *did* you establish Rome?"

"My mom told me to."

I turned to Virgil. "You really wrote a whole epic about this guy-?"

"Alright, to the Second Circle of Literature!" Virgil walked briskly away, trying to hustle me out of the cavern.

We followed a narrow path until it widened into a room that resembled a large Cathedral hall. "This is the '*Religious Texts and Essayists*.'"

"Are the essays about religion?"

"Well... in part. It was kind of hard to group these books. Give me a break."

"Virgil!" A man's voice called out with a heavy Italian accent. "My old friend!"

"Ah! Dante!" Virgil patted the man's shoulder, its ghostly form hovering over Dante's red robes. "This is another person that I am guiding," Virgil waved his hand at me.

"Yes," Dante shook my hand as he spoke. "Virgil here showed me the way through all the Circles of Hell and Purgatory. I never would have made it out alive without him."

"Whoa," I said, still shaking his hand. "I'm getting deja-vu."

"Run along, now," Virgil shooed me towards the room. "I need to catch up with Dante."

Hmph. Virgil bothered to learn Dante's name... I walked towards a man that was standing near the front of the cathedral hall. He was looking at the altar, his hands folded over his bishop's robes.

"Hello," I said when I was standing next to him.

"Ah," he sighed, still staring straight ahead. "I have sinned in my life. I was so weak before I converted! The sins I committed!"

I looked around to see if he was talking to someone else, but I guess he just liked to hop right into deep conversation. "Well, what sins did you commit?"

He suddenly turned towards me, clamping his hands on my shoulders. "*I stole ripe pears from a tree! And not even because I wanted to eat them! I just wanted to do something bad with my gang!*"

"Hey man, don't be too hard on yourself."

"Also, I was a sex addict. I slept with *sooo* many women... *But the PEARS!*"

"Alright, I'm gonna go." I shook his hands off my shoulders, darting towards a nun sitting in the pews and scribbling in a notebook. "What are you

writing?" I asked her, glancing over her shoulder.

"Oh, hello my dear, sweet child!"

I am writing poetry, of course.

Nothing makes me as happy as writing a verse.

But it's nothing extraordinary; it's rather mild."

"Wow, and you-you speak in rhymes, too. That's commitment."

She giggled, putting a hand to her mouth. "*Did* I rhyme? It comes so easily to me, sometimes I can't stop myself!"

Suddenly, Virgil was at my side, steering me towards the exit. "We're on a tight schedule here," he explained, ushering me onto the path once again. "You know how many books we have to get through in just two semesters?"

"I'd guess over 20—"

"It was a rhetorical question. We have to get through a lot." He paused, giving me a ghostly pat on the back. "But you were pretty close. Good job." We arrived at a set of double glass doors, a large library in the room beyond. One of the walls was lined with windows that stretched towards the ceiling, sunlight shining through and casting the oak tables and checkered floor with a golden hue. "This is the Third and final Circle of Literature, the '*Modern Tales*.' The common reaction in this Circle is '*Wow, I can finally fully understand the english these people used, damn you Lattimore*.' But alas, that was too long for a title."

"You there!" A scrawny man in silver armour came clanking towards us, his lance pointed at me. "You foul ogre! Have you come to battle me in the name of honor and fame? You will perish before the great Don Quixote, beast!"

I glanced behind me, putting a hand to my chest. "Well, that's just offensive."

"The guy is senile, give him a break," Virgil snickered. "Pfft, *ogre*. Ah, made this whole trip worth it..." He drifted away, going to tease Don Quixote.

I rolled my eyes at the ghost, beginning to walk towards an elegant woman who was running her hands over the book spines on the right wall. "I suppose you've come to ask me for my story?" she said when I was standing beside her.

"It would really help my participation grade."

She chuckled, glancing at me before returning her attention to the books. “Well, my name is Elizabeth Darcy. I fell in love with a really rich guy that I thought was a jerk at first, and he fell in love with me even though I’m not that rich and my family is pretty embarrassing. I was inhibited from realizing our compatibility by my prejudice and he was held back by his-”

“Pride?” I finished. “Yeah, one of the most suitable titles out there. It has a nice ring to it, too.” Elizabeth wished me well as I continued down the library, my attention being snagged by a pale, tall man with dark eyes. He was pacing between two tables, fiddling with his coat and muttering to himself. “Hi,” I said once I was beside one of the tables. “You ok, bud?”

“It only makes sense that I killed her. It was the rational thing to do, right?”

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna stay out of this one.” He didn’t seem to hear me as I strolled towards Virgil at the doors of the library.

“Beyond these doors is the Columbia campus,” Virgil started, staring at brick pathways, green lawns, and the picturesque steps of Low Library directly across from us. “Soon, you’ll actually be able to take classes here. Imagine that,” he gave me a smile, the door opening for me.

I started to leave, pausing on the steps. “Thank you, Virgil. This journey was a wonderful experience. I learned a lot about literature, about what it means to be human whether you are an Achean in a bloody war or a young woman falling in love. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

Virgil shooed me out the door. “Don’t get all sentimental with me now, ogre. Just remember what you learned here.”

I strolled towards College Walk, a new journey ahead of me-

“Oh!” Virgil shouted. “Watch out for the giant sloth of procrastination! It’s not Lit Hum exclusive. It’s a vicious monster that tends to follow people around. Byeee!”