

# A Road Never Walked Alone: The Journey for Joy (Preview)

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*“Can you tell me the story again?”*

*Night had fallen over Harmon City, and the streets had dried up as everyone retreated inside to rest. Even the train tracks had gone abandoned, and the distant whistles of steam engines had fallen to soothing whispers for the town’s residents. Within one of the buildings in the heart of Harmon City’s southern district, seven-year-old Ezra Petras clutched tightly at his blankets. He was buried up to his neck in the sheets, but his smile remained bright. The excitement in his eyes practically glowed in the light of the gas lamp pressed against the nearby wall.*

*“Again?” Vivian Petras laughed at her son, relenting without the need for an argument. She could never refuse anything Ezra asked of her. “I’ve told it to you every night for the last two weeks.”*

*Ezra nodded eagerly. “I want to hear it again. It helps me sleep.” They both knew that was a lie; if anything, the story fired up Ezra more than anything else. He could stay awake for hours there in the darkness, just letting his imagination guide him through the journey of the tale. Each night, Ezra added something new to his iteration of it, finding a spark of hope and letting it explode into a blazing inferno. Ezra loved carving out maps across his bedroom ceiling, wandering new paths that would show him every corner of Freyoria. The world was vast, but Ezra did not fear it when it was delivered to him through the words of his mother.*

*Vivian chuckled once more. She knew Ezra was going to spend at least an hour afterward thinking through the story and chewing on every word she spoke, but she could never bring herself to say no to him. The love in his eyes was too great for her to deny him anything. “Alright,” she agreed. Vivian cleared her throat, and mischief and timeless wisdom exploded in her eyes the way it always did when she began to tell this story. “Long ago, the continent of Freyo-*

*ria knew nought but chaos. Humans fought one another and the mighty dragons they shared the land with. The animals and monsters waged an endless war upon one another. Even the gods battled with everything they had. From the depths of the sea to the crests of the mountains to the clouds of the heavens, Freyoria was collapsing.*

*“But from the chaos of almost certain doom, one figure rose above the rest: the god of fortune, Pinith. He had traveled to every corner of Freyoria, and he knew everything the land had to offer. Over the course of his travels, Pinith found four treasures. Even in times of uncertainty and war, Pinith found endless joy when he looked upon them. His sudden rush of hope could conquer even the greatest of despair, and he knew that to be what his land needed.*

*“Many years passed, and when the war worsened rather than improving, Pinith knew it was time for him to apply the knowledge he had acquired all those years ago. He knew how to bring peace to Freyoria, and it began with his four treasures. He cast them down from the heavens to the earth, and for the first time in decades, Freyoria knew hope. The fog of fear dissipated, and love brought the world to a new dawn.*

*“First, Pinith called the Eclipse Diamond down to a town deep within the mountains. Many theorize it to be in the location where Prosperity Peak waits in the modern day. Second, the Zero Seal was sent to the crashing seas of Iscein. Third, the Radiant Pendant found a home within the deep trees of Freyoria’s forests. Lastly, the most lucrative treasure of them all, Ambrosia’s Smile, was sent to the rolling plains.*

*“Many centuries have passed since then, and the hope the treasures brought to the continent has only grown. Any traveler worth their salt knows all there is to know about the four treasures of Pinith, and the greatest among them are willing to pursue the bless-*

*ings from the heavens for themselves. Freyoria has found peace... But the treasures have not been reunited since their days in their master's hands. Any of the treasures individually will bring abundant joy to those who see them... But the power of all four treasures together is unparalleled. Perhaps one day, someone will be brave enough to unite them once more. Perhaps it could even be you."*

*As Vivian finished the story, Ezra practically glowed with excitement. "Thanks, Ma," he whispered breathlessly. He had memorized every word of the story, but hearing Vivian tell the tale was something else entirely. She had a perfect talent for grabbing the attention of an audience, and she never let up once she had someone's excitement in her grip. Ezra had never seen a better storyteller, and he doubted he ever would.*

*"You're welcome, Ezra," Vivian smiled, slipping back into her regular cadence effortlessly. "Now, it's time for a certain someone to get to bed." She pushed herself to her feet and twisted the valve on the gas lamp to extinguish its gentle flame. Vivian then leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Ezra's forehead, and he raised his head to enjoy the touch as much as he could. "Goodnight, Ezra."*

*"Goodnight, Ma!" Ezra called after Vivian as she pulled the door shut behind her. Once he was alone, Ezra sank as deep into his blankets as he could while still keeping his head aloft. He charted out the map of Freyoria with his eyes, using his ceiling as the canvas of his imagination. When he was old enough, he was going to do it. He was going to find the four treasures. If Pinith's treasures could bring endless joy, then Ezra was going to reunite them and share that joy with the world. No one else had done it yet, but he was determined to be the first.*

*Ezra let out a breathless sigh, his cheeks stinging from how brightly he was smiling. "Pinith's Four Treasures..."*



“...And that’s the story of Pinith’s Four Treasures.”

Twenty-two-year-old Ezra Petras strummed at the last few chords on his guitar as he finished reciting the chronicle. His eager audience consisted of children who were no older than he had been when he had first grown infatuated with the tale. As was to be expected, the children burst out into excited applause as soon as he was done singing. Ezra’s cheeks burned from the raw force of his smile, but he couldn’t bring himself to complain. That always happened when he recounted this story.

In the fifteen years since Ezra had heard of Pinith’s Four Treasures for the first time, he had shot up like a bean sprout, towering over just about everyone he knew. His dark skin glowed with the same warmth as ever, and his deep oak brown eyes were much the same. Ezra’s hair was tied back in locks that reached the middle of his shoulder blades, and each lock was lined with a gold cuff. He had matching golden hoop earrings too. None of the accessories were made with true gold, but he didn’t mind. The image was the same, and his mother had once told him that the gold brought out the flecks of hazel in his eyes to make him look even more alive. Everything about Ezra was full of joy no matter the circumstances. It was like he *was* happiness incarnate, and he loved it.

Today, Ezra wore a mauve poncho over an oversized white casual shirt, the sleeves of which were rolled up above his elbows on account of the heat. His trousers were a deep grape purple, though they were mostly covered by his tall brown boots. The boots were worn and had been loved and walked in a million times over, but Ezra didn’t mind. He polished them as much as

he could, and he had added a myriad of golden accessories and embellishments over the years to prove the shoes were still kicking. Beside Ezra's seat was a massive brown bag that he used to carry his guitar, and even though the bag was covered in small tears, it had been sewn together again with love each time.

The children sitting before Ezra followed a lot of the same patterns, all of their clothes having been carefully mended from each tear or cut. The building around them was run down with the roof caving in just to the left of the door, but no one paid it any mind. Instead, all eyes were on Ezra. He offered a few extra strums of his guitar for good measure even though his song was over. He was hardly the best singer, but he put heart into his performances, and as far as he was concerned, that was what mattered most. Ezra had learned how to refine his mother's old story into a song years ago, and the children of Harmon City ate it up each and every time just as Ezra had when Vivian first told him of Pinith's Four Treasures.

"That was a great story, Ezra!" a willowy girl named Ava cried out. "Where did you hear it?"

"My ma told me the story when I was your age," Ezra replied, pretending he didn't need to fight to keep his smile on his face. "It was my favorite, and I thought it was time I passed the joy on to a new generation of kids." Ezra had told the story to other kids at the Harmon City orphanage before, but since then, a wave of new children had arrived. Since none of them knew the tale, Ezra simply had to share it again. He would never dare to keep such a precious source of joy to himself, after all. Treasures like this were meant to be shared.

"Do you think the treasures are real?" came the inquiry of a boy Ezra knew as Finn. He was Ava's twin brother, though the

two didn't look all that similar. The only real thing they had in common was their piercing hazel eyes that glowed like stars in the night sky.

"Oh, I'm sure they are," Ezra replied with a confident nod. "All the world needs now is for someone to be determined enough to find them... And one day, somebody will be." *And maybe that person will be me.* Growing up, Ezra had been confident that he would be the one to see all of this through and finally bring the four treasures back to the eyes of the world, but since then, much had changed. Under better circumstances, he would have set out for his journey to find the treasures already, but the world had other plans. Instead, Ezra would simply have to settle on telling the children of Harmon City about the story. One day, he would change that, but for now, there was no place Ezra would have rather been.

The children burst into excited chatter, each of them on the verge of asking a question of their own only to be cut off by the orphanage's director, Anna. She had been watching the storytime session from her place against the nearby wall, but she pushed off it and rose to her full height as she approached Ezra. "Alright, kids. How about you go on and enjoy the afternoon readin' in the library?" Anna asked. A few children looked disappointed that they were being herded away from Ezra so soon after the story ended, so Anna tacked onto her previous suggestion with, "I'm sure at least one of the stories will be able to tell you about the four treasures."

That was enough to convince the children, and they all darted out of the common room to the makeshift library near the back of the building. Ezra laughed as the children vanished from view, and he secured his guitar in his bag. "It's nice to have such



an eager audience," he beamed. "It's even nicer to see all of them smilin' so brightly."

Anna approached him with a smile of her own. "You really do work magic with them. No one can make them smile quite like you. Thanks again for comin' by, Ezra. I don't think I can say it enough."

"You don't need to thank me. I love doin' this," Ezra assured her. He pulled his bag onto his back and checked that it was secure before glancing over to Anna once more. There was something troubled to her expression though, and even as she moved to escort Ezra back to the entrance of the orphanage, he could see darkness in her eyes.

"We really appreciate it," Anna went on, either choosing to hide that she was anxious about something or not wanting to acknowledge that Ezra had seen right through her. "The children can use any boost in morale they can find."

"And so could you, it seems," Ezra remarked. "Is there somethin' wrong? You seem troubled."

Anna opened her mouth to try and counter the point, but she quickly realized that there was no point in trying to lie to Ezra. He was simply too good at seeing through people, and he would figure it out immediately if she tried to obscure the truth. "I'm afraid there is somethin' wrong," Anna relented. "Ava and Finn's birthday is tomorrow, but the orphanage can't spare any money to buy them gifts. I was really hoping we would have enough, but after that big storm a few months ago..." She cast a wayward glance up at the sagging spot of the roof overhead, wincing halfway to her eyes' destination. "I've been forced to save everythin' we've got in order to make sure the building doesn't completely give in when the next storm hits."

"I understand," Ezra nodded. "And you've got nothin' to worry about. I'd be happy to make the children birthday gifts, no charge necessary. Every kid deserves somethin' for their special day, and I'll give them somethin' they won't forget."

"Are you sure about this?" Anna asked with a frown. "I don't want to make you do somethin' you don't want to. You don't need to feel obligated to help me. You've done more than enough by comin' here and telling stories to the kids for so many years."

"I want to help," Ezra assured her. "I'd hate it if Ava and Finn had to go without gifts. Besides, I think I can whip somethin' up fairly easily. I've got a lot of spare materials lying around at home, and I can check the town for more if I need extras."

Relief washed through Ava's features instantly. She was no stranger to Ezra's favorite hobby: repurposing spare materials he found scattered around Harmon City. In the poorer district of the city, everyone had to make the most of everything they had. Ezra was easily the most resourceful of all, taking in even the left-overs everyone else was happy to deem trash. He always managed to make something good of it too. When he put his mind to something, he could make some of the best inventions Harmon City's lower-class half had ever seen. Everyone in town knew of Ezra's skills with his hands, and Anna had seen a few of his trinkets firsthand as donations to the orphanage's pool of toys.

"Thank you so much," Ava smiled. She looked on the verge of tears from Ezra's kindness, and she bowed her head deeply in a show of gratitude that seemed to want to knock her off her feet. "I don't think I'll ever be able to make this up to you, but if there's ever anythin' I can—"

"Don't worry 'bout that. I told you that I wanted to help, and I meant it. I'm not in this so I can get anythin' in return,"

Ezra cut in. "I'll find somethin' great for Ava and Finn, and I'll be back before sundown tonight to give it to you. After all, it wouldn't do to make them wait for their presents tomorrow, would it?" Half the tension in Anna's shoulders faded away, and she nodded. "I'll be back in two shakes of a snake's tail."

With that, Ezra moved for the door and stepped out onto the streets of Harmon City with a smile that threatened to block out the sun. Unfortunately for him, the heat of the day would not be stopped by his relentless optimism. The wastelands of Freyoria were warm even on a cool day, but in the midst of summer, the heat was beyond sweltering. Ezra had lived in Harmon City his entire life, so he knew how to handle it, but that didn't stop sweat from beading up on his forehead. He swiped at it with the back of his hand and started to make his way back to the Petras family home.

Ezra tried to think through all the supplies he had waiting for him there, but he knew it wouldn't do him much good until he could see what he had gathered over the last few months. Ezra had become incredibly adept at gathering scraps from the rest of the townsfolk over the years, and by now, everyone in Harmon City's poorer district knew to go to him with any of their stray trash... Well, everybody else thought it was trash, but to Ezra, there was no greater treasure. As far as Ezra was concerned, every item had a purpose, and if he put his mind to it, he could find a good use for everything. Making toys for orphans was just one purpose of many Ezra had dreamed up for the scraps he had collected over the years. Many people had told him before that they couldn't imagine being able to create something entirely original without any schematic or blueprint, but Ezra always shrugged off

their praise. It came naturally to him, and it always had. That was one of the first skills he had learned from his mother, and...

No, he couldn't think about her right now. There were more important things to address, starting with making gifts for the twins. Ezra would have something put together for Ava and Finn in no time. He had promised Anna he would drop off their presents before nightfall, and if there was one thing Ezra Petras never did, it was break a promise, so he had to get started right away.

Harmon had always been a divided city. For as long as anyone could remember—and perhaps even longer than that—it had been split essentially in half by an elaborate train station and corresponding railroad tracks. The people from the poorer southern district rarely ventured into the excess and wealth of the northern half of the city. Many visitors had wondered openly how the two sides of Harmon could coexist, and Ezra knew the answer even though very few actually wanted to hear him say it: the upper class of Harmon needed those beneath them financially in order to fund their lifestyles. The poorest of Harmon lacked the money they needed to leave the city, and so, they were bound eternally to the servitude that came with living beneath the thumbs of the richest among them.

Despite this, the people of Harmon City's southern half had learned to live happily. Even in the face of misery and poverty, they had something the upper class did not: community. In Harmon's northern district, the wealthiest people in the city fought amongst themselves for what they believed to be a finite pool of status and privilege. In the poorer side of Harmon, everyone learned to lean on their neighbors because that was the only way to survive. It wasn't easy, not as long as the wealth-fueled government was working against them, but as far as Ezra was con-

cerned, he would take the community and friendliness of his side of town to the rich backstabbers of the north any day of the week.

“I’m home, Pa!” Ezra called out as he burst through the front door of the Petras home. He was careful to close the door slowly behind himself so he didn’t accidentally send the roof caving in on top of him. The orphanage wasn’t the only building in town that had suffered from the massive storm a few weeks prior, and Ezra had been forced to work overtime to keep his own house upright after it blew through Harmon.

Ezra’s father, Omar Petras, was sitting at the kitchen table when his son returned. “Ezra,” he greeted, his voice coming out as a breathless wheeze even though he hadn’t done anything to wind himself. “I didn’t expect to see you back so soon. I thought you were plannin’ on volunteerin’ at the orphanage for the rest of the day.”

Ezra nodded, darting into his bedroom off the front hall. When he returned, he was carrying a massive box of the miscellaneous scraps he had picked up over the years. Omar was unsurprised when Ezra dropped the box off on the kitchen table and began to sift through its contents. “Anna told me that a couple of the kids have a birthday tomorrow, but she hasn’t been able to spare the money to get them anythin’. I thought I would solve that problem for her,” Ezra explained. “So I guess I still *am* volunteerin’ for the orphanage. Just in a different way.” He pulled out a piece of stray fabric that would be perfect to transform into a doll. A ratty drawstring bag of beans followed the fabric on its way out of the box, and Ezra pulled his bag off his back to search for his sewing kit. He could give Ava a doll, but it would take a bit of work to get the stray fabric and beans into anything resem-

bling a toy. That still left the question of what he was going to do for Finn, but Ezra would get there soon.

Omar smiled, a low chuckle rumbling around his chest. "It's sweet to see you bendin' over backwards for those kids. I'm sure they appreciate it." Despite the smile on his face, there was no light in his eyes, and Ezra deliberately avoided meeting his gaze for that reason. Looking at Omar these days always made him sad, and Ezra couldn't afford to pause and let his emotions overtake him. He was on a time limit, and he couldn't waste even a moment.

"You should've seen them earlier. I told them the story of Pinith's Four Treasures, and their eyes all lit up like nothin' else," Ezra beamed. He paused in his search through his scraps to sneak a glance up at Omar. If there was anything that could get a reaction out of his father, it was the mention of that story.

Sure enough, Omar's already stormy eyes went impossibly darker. "I'm glad they liked it," Omar replied, his words brutal in their simplicity. Ezra tore his gaze away from his father and back to the box before him, not wanting to be caught staring for any longer than was absolutely necessary. He had already known that was how Omar was going to react, but he found himself unprepared as he searched for a response anyway. Omar always got this way when he was reminded of Vivian. Ezra had learned how to expect it and avoid the subject, but he couldn't help bringing up the story today. Perhaps it was because he had been feeling melancholy after leaving the orphanage too. The story could get into his head too sometimes when he let it. Regardless of Ezra's mood though, Omar would have asked about the story Ezra shared with the children. It was best to just be honest with him upfront.

Three years had come and gone since Ezra and Omar last saw Vivian. She had gone missing in the night seemingly out of nowhere, and Ezra and Omar were left to suffocate from their grief in her absence. There were no signs of a struggle, implying that she had left of her own accord rather than being kidnapped. The rest of their home was in pristine condition—or at least as pristine as the dilapidated house ever could be—to reinforce that theory. Ever since that day, Omar had lost almost all of his hope in the world. Despair seemed to rule his every waking minute, leaving Ezra to pick up the pieces. He tried his best to cheer his father up whenever he could, but it was much easier said than done. Nothing could return Omar to his old self save for Vivian's return, but it was impossible to say where she had gone or when she would be back.

But Ezra was certain she would be back one day. His mother must have had a reason for leaving, but that meant she would have a reason to come back soon too. Ezra had been counting on it every day for the last three years, occasionally offering a prayer to Pinith himself for Vivian's safe return. Each night, Ezra's pleas were left unanswered, but he refused to let his grief overcome him. Omar was depending on him, and so was the rest of the town. Ezra couldn't stop as long as there were so many others counting on him.

Ezra had thought many times about leaving Harmon to go and search for Vivian, especially in those first few months, but he had always abandoned the idea in the end. He was sure she would be back one day, and he needed to stay there for when she returned... Though deep down, Ezra just knew he was making excuses for himself. The entirety of Harmon's lower district knew Vivian and had been searching for her within the city's bound-

aries over the last three years. There would be more than enough people there to greet her when she returned. Ezra was just afraid of setting out in case something began to crumble in his absence.

Above all else, Ezra worried for Omar. He didn't know what his father would do without his son there to take care of him, and Ezra didn't want to entertain the thought either. Omar had taken up working for one of the richer men in Harmon's northern district, but the money was never enough to keep the family afloat. Ezra needed to be there to help him. He couldn't leave. Harmon was all he had ever known, and his dreams of traveling the world would have to wait until a time when it was less risky to walk away. Maybe that was just another justification for him to stay in the city, but Ezra didn't know for certain. He didn't think he could even afford the time to think it through.

Ezra was snapped out of his thoughts when he came across a small axle with two old wheels on either side. The axle was small, no doubt having been broken off a tiny toy carriage, and the wheels barely spun anymore. Ezra remembered picking the axle up during one of his trips to northern Harmon on an odd job a few months ago. The child owner of the toy carriage had broken off the axle after it stopped turning, and Ezra had picked it up before he could throw it out. Since then, Ezra had all but forgotten about it, but now, it gave him an idea.

Ezra took to digging through the rest of his scraps, and soon enough, his fingers closed around another axle with similarly rusted wheels, though these were a bit larger. If he could find a way to attach the axles to a common vessel, then he would be able to make a new toy carriage. Surely that would satisfy Finn as a gift. Ezra didn't know if he would be able to fix the problem of the wheels not turning, but he could figure that out once he got



to tinkering. The important thing was that he had a plan, and he couldn't wait to see it through.

"Yeah," Ezra mustered weakly, unable to avoid his inevitable response for any longer than he already had. "They really did." He continued sifting through the box, searching for anything that could save him from his bittersweet reverie. He missed Vivian more than anything, but he couldn't let her distract him from what he knew needed to be done. Even so, Ezra struggled to focus on what was sitting in front of him for more reasons than just his mind's inability to cooperate with his current task. He didn't have anything that could close the gap between the two axles nor did he have anything to make up the body of the doll. Wheels and beans were alright, but they didn't mean much if there was nothing to truly create a toy around them. Ezra could have taken this chance to carve out a wooden body for the toy carriage for Finn, but that wouldn't solve his problem of needing extra supplies for Ava's doll. Besides, he didn't have any blocks of wood that fit the size he was aiming for. No matter how he looked at it, he was going to have to find something else, and that likely meant venturing into town to search for more scraps. Surely he would be able to find something if he looked in the right place, and after all these years, Ezra knew exactly where the right places were.

Ezra gladly broke the uncomfortable silence that had collapsed between him and Omar as he tucked the supplies he had already set aside into his bag. "I'm goin' to look around town," Ezra explained, pretending he wasn't looking for any excuse he could to run out from under the shadow of Vivian's absent silhouette. "I just need a few more materials, and I'll be ready to get started on these toys."

Omar seemed every bit as glad for the distraction, and he nodded easily at his son. “Good luck, Ez.” He leaned in and pressed a kiss to Ezra’s forehead, though he had to rise onto his toes in order to do so. Ezra had inherited every bit of Vivian’s height, and not for the first time, Ezra wondered if he looked too much like his mother for his father to handle. If that was the truth, Omar didn’t dwell on it for longer than an instant. “I’m headin’ out to get groceries soon. I’ll see you when we both get back.”

“Got it. Thanks, Pa,” Ezra returned, his smile falling lopsided on his lips. He darted toward the door, hoping the oppression of everything he did not have would fade when he stepped outside. Deep down, Ezra already knew it wouldn’t be that easy, but he had always been the type to hope even in the face of insurmountable odds. It was a lesson Vivian had taught him, and Ezra would never dare to let go of what few traces of her he had left.

*Read the rest on May 8th, 2025, when “The Journey for Joy” begins release!*



## About the Author

Crescent Zephyr has been writing for as long as they can remember. From childhood, they were always lost in the stories of either their own mind or those others created. They decided young that they wanted to become a writer to share their tales with others. Crescent's favorite type of story to write is character analysis in any genre they can get their hands on. They love portraying characters that feel scathingly human in a way that others understand deep in their hearts. *A Road Never Walked Alone* is their debut book series, and they are excited to share both it and its characters with the world at last.

When not writing, Crescent can often be found reading or playing video games. They have a special fondness for RPGs and can get lost for hours in fictional worlds. They also have a penchant for poetry and enjoy performing their original work for audiences. Oftentimes, Crescent can be found sitting in the dark and plotting out their next performance or story in a typing frenzy.

Read more at [crescentzephyr.com](http://crescentzephyr.com).



