

The Fisher King

It was getting late now; the sun was slowly fading away and a breeze was gently swaying the trees on both sides of the river. The sky, peeking through and going over them, was reaching the colorful conclusion that signified the end of one day or the beginning of the next. A burning hot yellow was slowly going under the horizon leaving around it a ring of warm orange. The colors moved up in the sky slowly passing through purple, then violet then inklings of light blue that culminated in deep dark black behind them. Only the faint hew of the early stars was peeking through it.

It was a beautiful, warm summer day the jester thought. He examined the waters on both sides of the wooden peer. The stream seemed endless if one looked in either direction. Nevertheless, the water was eerily calm reflecting everything back like a mirror. He observed himself in it. Face, legs, arms, torso it all appeared to be there. Even the bell on his four-pointed hat was still there the only one he still had. Suddenly a ripple passed through his reflection.

"Careful milord I think it's about to bite" exclaimed the jester.

"No, it was just my hands" replied the king.

The joker continued "Nerves, sir? Perhaps I can sing you a song to sooth your mind? Perhaps... *Lady, to you without reserve I give my heart, thought and desire?*"

"Be quiet you fool!" cut the king "Songs! Have you gone mad! You'll scare away the fish"

The jester retreated inward examining the man. He looked quite old now, older than two weeks ago. Gray hair peaking from everywhere, bent forward since those old bones could no longer hold the flesh that keeps them together. He was still wearing his suit of armor and the long purple regal gown was stretched out behind him. There was no sword, nor a dagger not that there was any need of one right now. The focal point of the figure was nevertheless the crown resting on top of his head. Rubies, pearls and emeralds used to adorn its side, red velvet was all within, and the most intricate of writings and images were engraved on it.

It was unrecognizable now. The precious stones have all but fallen out and brown melee diamonds of rust took their place. The velvet, cut in scraps, is now intermixing with the gray hair and the engravings are all dented and could no longer provide a hint at the original image. Even some of the many points of the crown had begun to chip away.

"It has been more or less two weeks now since the revolt hadn't it sir?" asked the jester.
The king did not reply.

"Shouldn't have the boatman be already here?" he continued.

"He'll be here" answered back the king not removing his eyes from the water.

"But can we trust him? How do we know that on the next bend he is not going to turn us directly back to the rebels?"

"He's been serving my family for many years. My father, both my brothers and..." The king took a pause "...my sons have all called upon his services and he has always replied back in kindness. He has been a loyal friend to our family and we in turn have made sure to provide him with good business."

"Must have been quite a lucky man to have outlived them all." exclaimed the jester.

The king did not reply, he moved a bit forward and focused his attention on the fishing line.

"It's a miracle we escaped." continued the jester "There must have been a few hundred of them after us."

He examined himself in the water again. Not too bad, a couple of bruises here and there. The patches of his cape had started to tear apart. The patches on his clothes had started to pull as well. He sighed deeply and cast his glance at the setting sun.

"Don't they realize...?! Couldn't they see what I was trying to achieve?!" The old ruler was shaking, staring down at the water's surface. "They could have had everything, if only they had a little more patience."

"It has been, almost half a century since you took power my lord."

"Half a century of tears and blood, my family's blood... My sons' blood." His shoulders slumped a little, he breathed deeply, and his face hardened.

"Don't you remember? How it was before? When that old fool my uncle was too busy hunting, drinking or whoring around the castle lands? How had the barons taken control of everything else and were pillaging each other's lands? People were starving left and right not having enough to feed their families not to mention themselves?" The king turned towards him "It was I who reigned them in, it was I who threw that idiot of my uncle out of the castle, It was I who brought back peace in the realm."

"It was you who raised the taxes on grain and flour." cut back the joker "To raise money for a new extension of the castle if I remember. Right in the middle of a drought in fact."

"How am I supposed to know the wills of nature?! And the extension was to be the new courthouse, to be used by all, rich or poor."

"I feel it fair. For it takes longer for a magistrate to get down the stairs than for a peasant to cross the country for their day of justice." his companion snickered, but immediately tried to defend himself "Oh don't judge me so hard sir, I was simply making a jest. To me it'll be the new theater that I shall miss the most and the wine cellar right next to it. The madam of the place could always be persuaded to a round on the house if one sung the right song that matched her mood."

"It doesn't matter now anyway. It is all lost. They are probably pillaging that courtroom as we speak, and the castle, and the theater, your tavern and everything else in the city." he said with sadness.

"Don't sadden sir." said reassuringly the jester "I'm sure that the people will get back round to it once they realize they're no better off now than they were before your family's arrival. They'll realize what they want and..."

"The people don't want anything!" cut in the king "They agree or disagree, but never suggest. No, not the people. Individuals -yes; cities-yes; even counties and provinces-yes; but the people have any more interest or disinterest in their future as the cows that graze in this kingdom's fields."

The man was visibly agitated, ominously looking at his companion but suddenly his expression changed, and he looked sullenly down at the pear.

"Perhaps the biggest jest of it all lies within that fact."

The fool remained silent. The old king turned back towards the river and sighed deeply.

It was getting very late now. The darkness that had started at their backs was close to swallow the entire horizon at their front. Only the last few rays of the sun were peeking above the distant shore, casting dancing beams on the faces of the two companions. It was completely quiet. Neither frog in the water, nor bird in the sky or cricket in the field could be heard. The occasional rustling of the leaves by the wind was the only thing to break the silence. The water continued to

be completely still, although now it simply reflected the darkness of the sky. With each passing moment the more restless the two companions became.

"Shouldn't he be here by now?" said the joker looking both ways of the river.

"Patience." whispered the king "He will come."

As soon as he said it a small glowing silhouette appeared at one end of the water. Big as a candle but distinct enough that it wasn't a trick of the mind. With each passing moment the figure became bigger and bigger until the shape could clearly be identified as a man standing upright with a paddle pushing some kind of a vessel across the canal. The apparition was confirmed by the water as well, through the small waves the boat created that were now crashing against the shore at their feet. A few moments further and now the boatman and his raft were a couple of meters away from the two men letting them examine the stranger more clearly.

The boat had the shape and style of a gondola. The oaken hull was painted black or some other dark color which now was indistinguishable due to the night, and it blended itself with the water. The rim of the boat, where the hull ended was painted red and it encompassed the whole edge of the vessel. At each end of the gondola, there were two lanterns hanging from curved and ornately carved wooden posts, to provide a smidgen of visibility both to the back end and front of the boat. Within the raft itself, at either end behind the lanterns were triangular resting places covered with purple soft padding. In the middle at equal distance from each other were two benches similarly upholstered with the same purple material.

At the center of the gondola between the benches stood an old man holding firmly a long oar which he used to push the whole raft through the water. There wasn't anything remarkable about the individual's appearance, which by itself was remarkable considering the rich and elegant vessel he was driving. He wore plain trousers and shirt as well as a vest to keep him warm through the night as one might guess. He had a small, kept beard stretching a couple of centimeters from his face. He wore a serious, dedicated expression looking straight ahead as if expecting trouble at any moment. Once he reached the peer, he lowered the oar and stopped the boat in front the two men. He turned to them and the look on his face changed to a welcoming expectation. He smiled to both before addressing the king directly.

"My liege" and he bowed down deeply, arm across the stomach "How do you do? It is an honor to have you on my humble vessel."

They were still sitting on the peer. The king looked up at him and nodded.

"No need for the formalities. I'm as much of a king now as this fool sitting next to me."

"Nonsense!" replied the boatman "It is the man that fits the title, not the other way around, and I've had quite a few of your family on my deck at one time or another to say that you fit it best." he said with a warm smile.

The mood of the king did not seem to change by the flattery. He lowered his head towards the fishing pole and pulled out the line from the water. He hooked it to the bottom of the pole and set it aside next to him on the peer. He looked back at the man and asked.

"Tell me boatman, you've been through this more than once. Does it ever end, am I just the next in line of liberators turned usurpers? Did I manage to make a difference, or will I be just a footnote in this land's long story?"

The old man studied his face for some time than turned away and looked at the last couple of rays of sun going over the horizon, there wasn't really any light anymore, just a slight light blue hue at one edge of the sky, a memory of the past day.

"I remember when your uncle was still alive, when I carried him on this same boat many years ago..." he replied still looking at the sky. "Not much has changed since then. It is still the same waters I drive my boat through and still the same scenery. I guess I'm just in the line of work where change is something quite rare. I assume it will stay the same long after me as well..."

"So, then it was all for nothing?" asked the king with gloom in his voice.

The boatman stared at his face for some time before answering.

"I can only speak from experience, sir. Some of the people I carry through avoid making a change altogether some because of fear others as tradition. There are also those who appear to simply exist to observe the current natural order of things, believing that each disturbance is an unjustified decision that they are not allowed to make nor believe that they have any right to make."

"Others..." and he looked back at the king "come into this world trying their best to make as much noise and disturbance as possible. As if born with the knowledge that when they die it would have all meant nothing and out of that fear, they try to make a mark for others to follow or for themselves. So that they may die with the knowledge that they have left it." he continued "I cannot answer your question, perhaps it is irrelevant for neither an affirmative answer will bring you peace nor a negative one will bring you revelation. Perhaps, whether the trees we plant now shall live to grow fruit after us is the reason is the reason for our agony but also the reason why we keep going on."

The boatman narrowed his eyes to the horizon again. The sun had disappeared.

"It is late now my liege, there shouldn't be any disturbances during our crossing. Will you and your companion join me on board?"

The king nodded drowsily.

"This day has put me in a melancholic mood." said the jester "Do you mind if I compose a song for this occasion while we travel aboard my lord?"

"Do as you wish." and the king climbed on board.

The boatmen waited until his passengers were seated and then he used his long oar to push them away from the pier and onto the middle of the river. There was nothing to see on either side of the banks, not even the banks themselves. The lanterns of the boat only served to push the darkness a little and mainly just projected the images of the passengers atop the water they were passing. The jester was seated in front plucking at his lute. The king was at the back with a fishing poll in one hand cast behind the vessel and himself looking back at it, seemingly lost in thought.