

## The Ferryman's River

Sunlight pierced through a tangle of withered, burning branches, drifting past rows of crumbled gravestones in a shimmering haze. The General stumbled, catching herself on a fractured slab of worn rock, the resting place of some great forgotten legend. Many more would be buried here today, she realised. Friends, family, random soldiers who had fought beside her for moments, before being swept away into a sea of tearing knives and bloody spears. And she was empty. Her breath slowly came back, sending shudders echoing through her body. She slumped against the gravestone onto the wet mud.

Bodies lay strewn about across the graveyard, abandoned between blackened stumps and scorched grass. Broken spearheads and swords lay scattered amongst the swaying grass, flickering in the daylight. The air was thick with still smoke and death. The General turned away from the mutilated corpses wreathed around her. Her soldiers, her friends. She'd had enough memories to last a thousand sleepless nights.

A low resonating note rung out, echoing over the lifeless plains. She glanced up towards a bell tower in the distance looming over an empty city. The frantic toll of the bell reverberated through the stone walls of its keep, rousing the civilians huddled inside with a sickening dread.

A corpse in gilded armour lay beside her. She found its helm nearby. A lion crest. Tearing a scrap from its shirt, the General kicked the body away from her. She turned to the arrow shaft imbedded below her right shoulder, black veins spreading from the wound. Clenching her teeth, she pulled out the shaft and quickly bound it with the cloth.

The gentle trickle of flowing water reached her ears. She looked through the trees to see a murky river rushing past. Dragging her aching body towards the water, the General felt an odd chill envelop her. She reached out into the water, blood spilling from her arms, dissolving into the dark waters. She splashed some onto her face and into her wound, ignoring the pain. Seemed safe enough. She leant down, taking slow sips from the river with cupped hands then collapsed back onto the grass.

The General pulled out a wooden amulet from behind her breastplate and held it up. *This is what you chose for yourself, it seemed to say, you chose vengeance over your own blood.*

She scowled. *I know I'm going to die today. No need to rub it in.*

The clouds above began to blur, the trees, the sound of footsteps rushing towards her, the smoke, and as she gazed up into the sky, the world went black.

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She woke up. Rising to her feet, the General found the forest around her, the dark river beside her still gently coursing. But the fire and smoke were gone. The cold feeling returned as she made her way back to where the battlefield should have been, instead finding a cacophony of flourishing plant life, lining the trees as if neither had ever been touched by flames. Turning back to the plains, she found a small cottage standing alone where the city should have been. She limped towards the house. Maybe she'd find answers there.

The door wasn't locked. The General took that as a good sign. She ducked under the doorframe, stepping into a sort of living room. The cottage was dark, save for the little light streaming in from an open window. Basic furnishings encircled the room, positioned opposite an empty fireplace. The wooden floor creaked as she walked towards the centre, where a small table held a bowl of pomegranate seeds. Her stomach twinged. Ignoring her better instincts sat down, and grabbing a handful of the seeds, she ate them, savouring their bittersweet juices.

A figure moved from the edges of the room. The General sprung out of the chair sending it clattering to the floor, her hands grasping air as she reached for her sword. She backed towards the doorway, her eyes pinned to the newcomer. The stranger's panicked gaze caught her own. He wore a padded leather tunic over a mail shirt and gripped a knife in one hand. Her eyes drifted towards the crest on his armour. *That damned lion.* Something in his

eyes seemed to shift. The soldier dropped his knife on the table and collapsed into a chair opposite her.

“Go ahead, you must be hungry after all that fighting.” He motioned towards the bowl.

The General watched him coldly. The soldier sunk into his seat, weary.

“I’m sorry that you’re here,” he said. His eyes were turned to the floor. “All this death and bloodshed, if I could take it back, I would.” She frowned. As if *their* kind cared about peace. He continued.

“I’d figured that you lot had won. Why did *you* die?”

The general pulled up the sleeve of her tunic, his words confirming her guess. The black tendrils had spread further from beneath the bandage. The soldier grimaced, motioning to a pouch on his belt.

“I’d give you these,” he said, “but it’s a bit late now.”

The soldier’s gaze drifted. She hesitated for a second, before picking up the chair and sitting back down. The bowl had tipped over, dripping dark red juices onto the table. The soldier turned to her again.

“I’d always wondered what the empire wanted with a tiny city like ours,” he said. “Why did you come for us?” The General told him that she did not know. The Holy One had told them all that the lions were killers. Left unchecked, they would run the rivers red with the blood of children. She met the eyes of the soldier and the pain behind them, wondering if he was truly capable of such a thing.

“Why did *you* fight?” she asked. The soldier sighed. She tensed as he stood, but relaxed as he moved towards the doorway he’d come through before. He stopped at the doorstep and motioned for her to follow. Keeping a distance from the soldier, she let herself be led into a cramped bedroom. A small straw mattress sat below the open window, next to an open chest filled with little wooden figurines. A great mural spanned the opposite wall, grand castles, lush forests, and lakes decorating the landscape. The General caught the corner of the soldier’s mouth twitch upward as he saw the painting.

“My house was waiting for me when I got here,” he began. He turned to the mural.

“My daughter never liked to help us on the farm.” His fingers traced a river across the wall.

“She’d spend hours painting anything and everything. The most wondrous worlds you could ever imagine, and more, that only she could. The council

even asked her to decorate the city hall.” His eyes were distant as he turned back towards her. His fingers grasped a cord on his wrist.

“And my wife, Alice was- *is* the kindest person I ever knew. She’d build these incredible contraptions that could do anything, give them away to anyone who needed them.” The soldier looked at her. The General looked away, unsure why she felt so guilty.

“They deserved to live,” he continued. “And now I’m waiting here to give whatever comfort I can when they arrive, to apologise for how I’ve failed them.”

The echoes of a knell sounded in her mind. The fates of the city folk were already sealed, they’d either become slaves or die. She suspected that the soldier was hoping for the latter.

“Do you have a family?” the soldier asked. She didn’t reply. He hesitated.

“Sorry,” he said, quickly, “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“My son died years ago.” The words left the General’s mouth before she’d realised. What was she doing, sharing her darkest secrets with an enemy? A *murderer*? But nobody had asked before. She kept going.

“Bandits. I was away serving the kingdom and came home to a grave.” Her face was blank and empty. No tears would come. They never did.

“The villagers blamed me. They said that I cared more about the empire than any of them. I went back to the army. All I could do was kill more evil men before they could hurt anybody else.” The soldier placed a hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged it away.

“We’re both lost it seems,” he said, “maybe that’s what this place is. A festering pit for ruined souls.” She looked at him.

“Do you know what this place is?” she asked.

“My people have stories about the magic in this world. I could guess.”

“What is your guess then?”

The soldier paused.

“It’s a type of afterlife, I think.” He explained how the afterlife would appear differently for different people.

“All the others who died might be somewhere else, waiting for their own loved ones. Or maybe they are already gone.”

“Why is it here?” The General asked.

“It’s a waiting room. One last chance to find peace before we fade into the void. Don’t you feel the pull?” He glanced at her. She nodded.

“Even now it tugs on our souls,” he continued. “That’s what the food here is for. And the rivers. To keep us anchored to this world.” The soldier sat on the mattress, leaving space for her.

“Honestly,” he said, “I like it here. Its quiet. I don’t feel pain anymore.” He looked out the window. The General clutched her wound as it throbbed, feeling sweat line her shoulder. The veins were creeping onto her upper arm. She pulled her sleeve down and sat down on the other end of the bed.

“Is this place magic?” She asked him. The soldier tilted his head.

“Magic is a strange thing. Nobody understands its nature, but our stories are carried down through generations.”

“Could I hear one?” The soldier raised an eyebrow, amused. Then he nodded.

“Here’s one about that river. They say that a ferryman would carry souls down that river, from the living world to their final resting place. Once, three men tried to negotiate with the ferryman. The dead paid him in silver, so they offered him gold. He would drink from the river, so they offered him wine. In their desperation, they gave him corpses to replace their own. They spent their

entire lives trying to please the ferryman, each offering more costly than the last. Their greed changed them. Their fear transformed them. The men grew hooves, and long ears, and pink flesh and tails. The ferryman at last came for them, not for three men, but three pigs. Soon they were gone, their gifts forgotten, their fear forgotten, their names faded forever.”

He looked at the General with a grave expression but tilted his head, noticing a wide grin creep across her face.

“I tell you a cautionary tale about three idiots wasting their lives and you’re smiling?” he asked. She laughed. The General wondered when the last time was that she had done so.

“It’s just ridiculous,” she said, “How can you be so serious describing men magically transforming into pigs?”

She shook her head. “Besides, a ferryman didn’t bring me here.”

“It’s only a story,” he replied. “Who knows how true it is.”

The General wondered what she would look like as a pig. She glanced at the man sitting next to her. *Probably deserve it more than him*, she thought.

His eyes lit up and he turned to her.

“Maybe I can show you some real magic instead?”

She nodded.

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He took her through the forest. The wind picked up as they walked, rustling through the leaves. The cold air brought some comfort to her burning skin. The man rubbed his shoulders, muttering about how he should have left his armour on. The sun had just begun to dip below the horizon, the sky moving from a vibrant orange to a more tranquil purple colour. They stopped, reaching a clearing before a cliff. The wind was stronger up here, and below the cliff, the same dark river rushed past. But this time, above the river a thousand crystals floated in the air, their light reflecting against the surface of the rippling water like a sea of stars. The crystals enveloped the landscape, an infinite expanse of glittering riches, pinpricks of fire scattered across the horizon. Eyes wide, the General turned to the man, who grinned back.

“Imagine how incredible it would be if this place existed in the real world,” she said. His smile grew.

“Actually, it does exist,” he replied, eliciting a blank expression from her.

“I’d come to this place to relax, almost every day.”

“How-”

“The crystals can only be seen from this one spot. It was a secret my wife and I shared, but now you know too, I guess.” The General remembered the real forest she had left behind. Rows of ash and charred wood.

“It’s gone now,” she whispered, “The war saw to that.” The man nodded, eyes downcast.

“This world is just a reflection of reality,” he said.

The General pulled out her amulet again, grasping it in a fist and holding it close to her chest.

“What is that?”

“My son made it for me,” she replied. “It was so I’d always remember.” He was silent.

*And I did remember. I still do.*

“It’s not magic,” she said, pre-empting his question. “The empire called magic dangerous and evil.”

The man’s gaze drifted off into the distance for a while. Maybe he was counting the crystals.

“It’s a different kind of magic,” he concluded, “Not just a reminder for you, but a way for your son to stay with you.” Holding up the pendant again, the General felt warmth creep into her heart. *I loved you no matter what you chose*, is what it *really* seemed to say.

“You’re kinder to me than I deserve,” she told him. He shook his head.

“That’s not true. We all need kindness. Only then can we give any in return.”

The sky had shifted to a deep purple, almost as dark as the river. She sat at the edge of the cliff, her feet hanging over, and the man joined her. The water swirled gently below. A faint ringing returned, echoing in her mind. She turned to him.

“If this is your own reality, why am I here? I never knew you before.” He hesitated, suddenly afraid. But he gave in.

“That wound in your shoulder was from my arrow.”

She stilled.

“I- I’d never killed anyone before. I saw you collapse just before I died.”

The General face was empty as she watched the sun fall below the horizon.

“Do you hate me?”

She was silent for a while.

“No,” she answered, finally. “I think... I think I wanted this. To end everything. I’d lost all I could lose, and this was just the bit I didn’t care about anymore.”

Her eyes were so far away.

“Well, you should have cared. Death hides in every shadow, but nobody should have to face him before their time. Not you, not your son...”

“Not you either.”

The General felt a tug on her soul. She held her hands up and the crystal light passed through them. The man frowned, watching her. He stood up.

“There are more pomegranates in the house,” he said. He offered her a hand. She took it, trying to pull herself up, but a searing pain coursed through her shoulder, and she yelped, letting go as she fell back onto the grass. The man’s eyes flashed with alarm.

“Your hand is burning,” he remarked. He tilted his head. Clutching her shoulder, the General took long breaths, restraining her pain.

“Can you show me your wound,” he asked. She nodded, pulling up her sleeve so he could unwind the cloth. He leant closer, as he inspected the dark veins spreading across her arm.

“You aren’t dead, you’re *dying*.”

“What?”

His eyes sparkled. Quickly binding the wound, he pulled the pouch from his belt and showed her the herbs inside.

“You can go back,” he said.

Pulled from her daze, she turned from his gaze to the crystals below.

“Why?”

The man’s expression dimmed.

“I don’t want to see my family again. There’s nothing real for them here. Or for you.”

She turned to meet his eyes, but his were on the amulet.

“You can stop this,” he pleaded. The General hesitated. Then nodded. The forest around them had faded to an incomprehensible blur. The stars above and crystals below grew brighter.

“What’s your name?” she asked. She barely caught his reply.

The world was silent and dark. She felt the pouch in her hands.

“You are a good person,” she whispered to the void. “Goodbye Dorian.”

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Reya woke in a medical tent. Her shoulder ached. She sat up, undoing the bindings of her wound, but the black tendrils were already fading. A small pouch lay on the table beside her bed. A man sat beside the opening of the tent, staring at the ground. With a shock, she realised that she knew him. She called his name.

His eyes seemed distant.

“They’re all dead,” he muttered. His head snapped up, as he realised that she was awake.

“Apologies General,” he started. “The war is won. We took heavy losses, and more than half of those who remain are no longer in fighting shape. They really did a number on us.”

*And we did a number on them, she thought.*

“The rest of the soldiers have already left to secure the town and its keep.”

Reya hesitated.

“What would happen to the civilians in the city?” she asked. The soldier frowned, confused.

“The usual treatment, of course,” he replied. “What else would we do?” He looked concerned.

“It is distasteful,” he continued, “but it’s the best way to keep those barbarians under control. Besides, we always treat our slaves well.”

The General nodded and tried to rise from the bed. She held up her hand as the soldier moved to support her.

“Pull our troops from the city,” she said to him. She continued before he could protest. “Form a perimeter and bring whoever now leads these ruins to me.”

The soldier’s face slightly paled as he heard a familiar edge in her voice. He nodded.

“As you command , General,” he said, his tone making it clear who bore the responsibility for what was to come. He slipped out through the opening in the tent. After a short moment, Reya made to follow him.

She left the tent, greeting the open air and looked out over the plains to the city. Reya knew *they* wouldn’t be too happy with her sudden turnaround, though she would have to deal with the consequences as they came. For now, she had a promise to keep.